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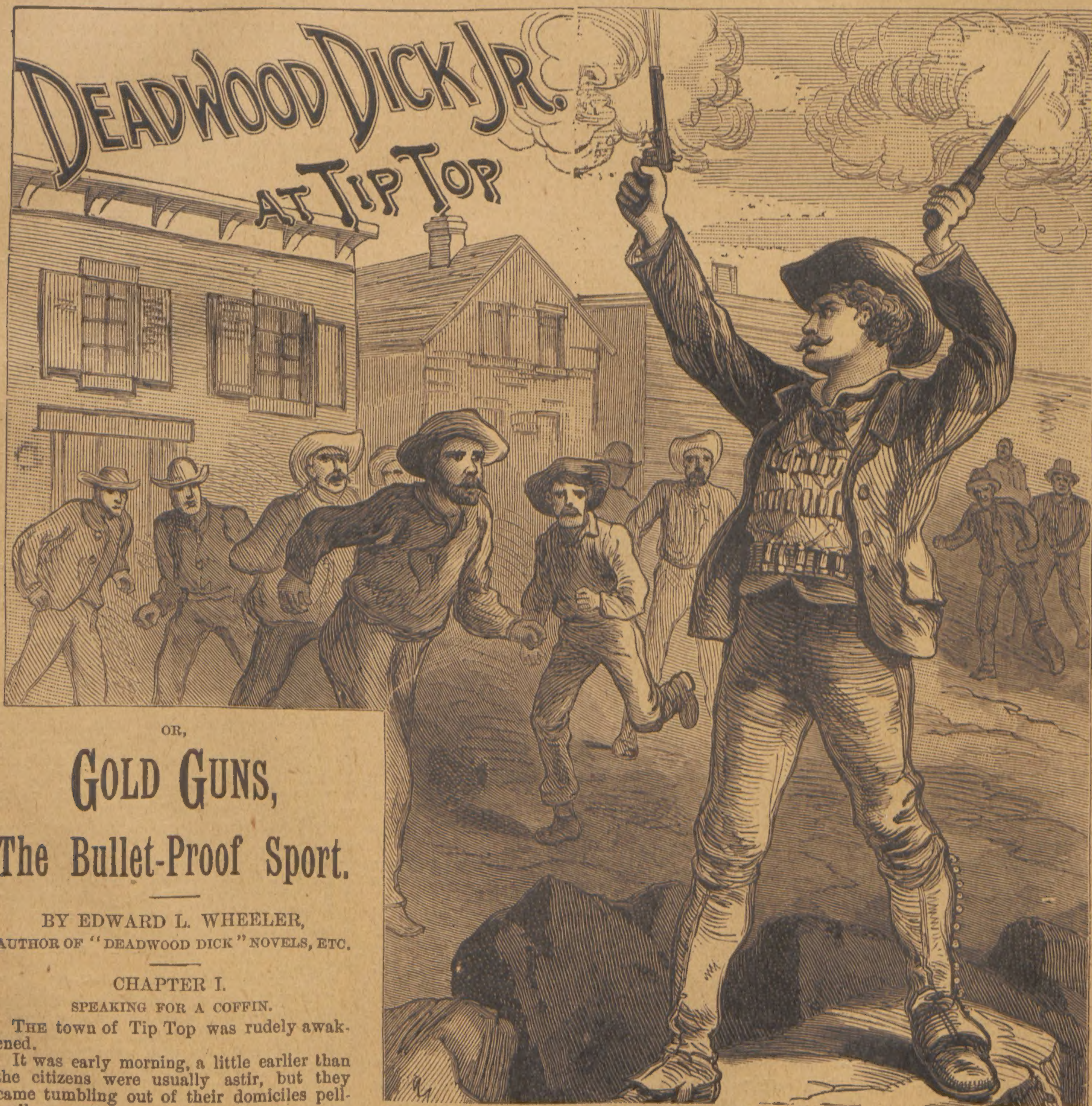
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OR,
GOLD GUNS,
The Bullet-Proof Sport.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SPEAKING FOR A COFFIN.

THE town of Tip Top was rudely awak-
ened.

It was early morning, a little earlier than
the citizens were usually astir, but they
came tumbling out of their domiciles pell-
mell.

HE WAS SENDING BULLETS SKYWARD AS FAST AS HE COULD PULL THE TRIGGERS.

Scarcely a man of them all had stopped for his coat, and two at least carried their boots under their arms, so great their haste to get out and learn what it all meant, anyhow.

In the center of the Square, so-called, was a pile of rocks, some of which had "grewed thar," as was said, but the most of which had been rolled from the different building sites hard by; and on top of these stones, on this fine morning, stood the handsomest man Tip Top had ever seen.

And it was he that was making all the noise.

In each hand was a big gun, glittering yellow in the sunlight, and he was pelting bullets skyward as fast as he could pull the triggers of the superb revolvers.

He was a stranger.

A man about the medium height, he was clad in a complete outfit of canvas of fine texture, close-fitting and well-made. He had leggings of a coarser kind, buttoned downward from the knees, and his hat, still finer than his garments, was of the broadbrim pattern.

The loose collar of his soft flannel shirt was restrained by a silk tie carelessly knotted, and over his vest he wore something that looked like a lacework of narrow leather straps, which supported three separate cartridge belts, one above the other. He had piercing, magnetic eyes, and a graceful mustache, while a wealth of wavy hair adorned his shapely head.

At first he paid no attention to the citizens, as they appeared from their huts, tents, cabins, wigwams, bungalows and what not, but kept right on firing, and in a moment men were running toward him from every direction.

"Hillo! hillo!" sung out the mayor of the town, Miller Broadaxe by name, as he came up; "what in ther tarnashun ails ye, stranger?"

"Oh! you are alive, are you?" observed the stranger, calmly, as he ceased firing and proceeded to wipe his guns with a soft rag which he produced from one of the pockets of his jacket.

"Alive!" cried the mayor. "Nobody but dead men could sleep through sech a racket as you have been makin' out hyer. What d'ye mean by et?"

"I have been in towns where a single shot would bring every galoot out of his kiosk in two seconds," replied the canvas-clad stranger, in the same cool manner; "but here I have had to make my guns hot to find out whether you were dead or alive. I merely wanted to inquire if there is a carpenter in town—"

"Wull, gol-durn your brass!" cried the mayor, half in anger. "Did you wake up this hull camp jest a-purpose to ask that blame-fool question? I reckon you will find out that we aire alive, ef you wait around long enough; what d'ye say about et, pard?"

"I opine he wull," one man ventured.

The fact of the matter was, they were all admiring the stranger, not more for his good looks and peculiar dress than for his cool and confident manner.

He had now finished wiping one of his guns, and had loaded it and dropped it into its place at his hip, and was proceeding with the other; and the crowd did not have to be told that the weapons were gold-plated.

"I am glad to be assured on the point," he remarked, in the same calm, quiet way.

"But, about the carpenter: have you a man here that answers to that calling?"

"Yes, a dozen of 'em, sech as they aire."

"I want one who can turn out a coffin on short notice."

"A coffin!"

"That was what I said, sir."

"And what do you want with a coffin? Aire ye crazy?"

"Well, I was advised to speak for mine,

if I ventured to come here to Tip Top, that's all."

"Told to speak fer yer coffin?"

"Exactly."

"And who giv yer sech advice as that?"

"I will mention no names, but I thought I would carry out the injunction. If that carpenter will kindly step forward, now, and take my measure, I will be greatly obliged to him."

"But, durn et, stranger," asseverated the mayor, "what's the use of troublin' yer head about a coffin until ye ar' dead? An' then I ruther reckon the trouble will fall on somebody else, anyhow. Besides, you look as if you would be a tough galoot in a tussle, and the coffin might be wanted fer t'other feller."

"Well, there is something in that, I suppose; I will have it made a size or two too large for me, and take the chances of its fitting him. Now, then, Mr. Carpenter, come right—"

At that moment the report of a gun was heard, and the stranger was seen to give a slight start.

The report had come to their ears from somewhere on the right, and all looked in that direction, but no smoke was to be seen, nor was any one in sight who could have been the one to fire.

The canvas clad stranger stooped, and coolly picked up something from the ground, saying:

"Well, he meant business, anyhow, citizens, and here is the proof of it," and he held up to view a piece of lead about the size of a two-cent piece, shaped like a saucer.

"What ther merry mischief is et?" demanded the mayor.

"The bullet he fired at me, that's all," was the cool response. "I am pretty tough, and he will have to use harder lead than this if he expects to puncture my hide with a bullet. His aim was good enough, though. See here."

He indicated a spot on his jacket, over his right breast, as the place where the bullet had struck him, and had it penetrated it must have pierced his lung and heart and caused instant death. But, was it possible that a bullet could strike him and not enter?

Miller Broadaxe and all the rest were staring at the stranger with eyes and mouths open wide.

The stranger kept watch in the direction whence the shot had come.

"Look 'e hyer," cried the mayor, "do you mean to tell us that that aire thing you have got in your fingers was a bullet, an' that et struck ye whar you say?"

"Such is the unvarnished fact, the unadulterated truth, my friend," was the calm assurance. "But, as you see, it was too soft to do any damage. And, by-the-way, Mr. Carpenter, maybe it will be just as well to put off taking my measure. If this is the best the other fellow can do, he may need the coffin himself before he gets done with me."

As he said this, the stranger stepped down from the stone heap and mingled with the crowd.

The crowd looked upon him with almost awe.

"Stranger, what might yer name be?" the mayor made bold to ask. "Ef what you say is true, you ar' certainly a hoss."

"My name? Well, sometimes I am called Gold Guns, and sometimes the Bullet-proof Sport. It makes little difference to me what you call me; I'm not proud. But, say, what's the prospect for a good breakfast?"

CHAPTER II.

STRIKING A SNAG.

TIP TOP was wide awake now, certainly. Even the women and children, the few the town could boast, were out, by this time.

George Goss, the proprietor of the "Little

Turtle" Hotel, assured the sport that breakfast would be ready at his hostelry in the course of an hour, and Gold Guns bade him lead the way.

The "Little Turtle" was the only hotel the town of Tip Top could show, at that time, but it answered all the requirements of the place. It was named after an Indian who had, in some manner, left his name behind in local tradition when he shuffled off for the happy hunting-grounds.

The crowd followed after the Bullet-proof Sport, eagerly commenting upon what they had seen and heard.

The mayor and Goss were almost envied, because they walked and talked with him.

He was looked upon as a visitant from another world, almost.

"Wull, I don't like ter doubt yer word, stranger," commented the mayor, after he had examined the saucer-shaped bit of lead which Gold Guns declared was the bullet that had been fired at him, "but, durn me ef I won't have ter see et done 'fore I kin believe et."

"Well, I won't try to force my statement upon you, sir," said the sport, with a smile. "It is rather hard to believe, at first sight. But, no matter; who is this gentleman?"

The person referred to was a man who had just stepped out of the hotel.

"That is Ben Crouse," answered the mayor. "We call him Beautiful Ben, but he is anything but beautiful when he gets riled, I'm tellin' ye."

"If he is any less beautiful then than now," the new-comer commented, "I have no desire to see him riled, I assure you. His visage would shatter a French plate mirror as it is."

"You hadn't better let him hear you say that," cautioned the mayor.

"No?"

They were nearing the hotel now, and the man in question stood upon the steps as they approached.

He was a big fellow, more than six feet tall and large in proportion, and was about as homely a specimen as it would be possible to find. He looked at the sport with something of a scowl.

This man Crouse, by the way, was superintendent of the Honeycomb Mine.

"What have you got there, Broadaxe?" he inquired of the mayor, with something of a sneer in his tone.

"Do you refer to me, sir?" asked Gold Guns.

"Yes, you're the object of my question," was promptly acknowledged.

"Then there is no need to trouble the mayor; I can speak for myself. I'm an independent denizen of the world at large."

"Oh, you are, eh?"

"Yes. What are you?"

"None of your business."

"No? Maybe you are the man who fired that cowardly shot at me a few minutes ago? It came from this direction, and you have only just put in your appearance. Did you fire it?"

"Supposing I should say I did, what would you do about it?"

"I would invite you to step out here and try it again, that's all. Maybe it was you, too, who warned me to speak for my coffin if I ventured to come here to Tip Top. If you are the man, you will never have a better chance to make me ready for it, taking me before breakfast."

"What do you suppose I know about you, fool?"

"Not as much as probably you will, ass."

"Have a care, sir!" and the face of the homely man grew dark with rising anger. "I did not shoot at you, and I certainly have had nothing to do with warning you to speak for your coffin; but, if you are going to rub up against me in this fashion, you may need one."

The crowd was dropping back to make

room, for it was well known that Crouse was an ugly customer.

"It was you who did the rubbing, first, sir," declared the sport, fearlessly. "And, as to your not being the man who fired at me, I have got only your word for that, while all the evidence goes to prove the contrary."

"Confound you, what do you mean?"

"Just what I have said."

"Well, what evidence is there that I fired at you? For one cent I would put a bullet into you for your impudence!"

"Two can play at that game, my friend," coolly. "In the first place, the shot came from this direction, and you have just come out of the house; then there is a stain of burnt powder on your left hand, as if you had used that hand to steady the weapon so that you would get a dead sure aim at me. Maybe if you show up your gun we shall find one chamber empty, too."

Something of a pallor appeared upon the face of the big man, and his right hand seemed to evince an inclination to move around to his hip.

"You had better have a care," he said, grimly. "You are likely to carry this joke too far, if you keep on."

"There is no joke about it," declared the sport, cool as ice. "I am more than ever inclined to believe that it was you who fired at me. Dare you hand over your gun for examination. If there is no empty chamber—"

He was cut short.

Quick as thought did Ben Crouse jerk his gun from his hip pocket, and fire, without aim, yet straight at the sport's breast.

Gold Guns was seen to start, and the impact of the bullet forced him to take a step backward to keep his feet, but in the same movement, he whipped out his big brace of golden revolvers and covered the homely man's heart.

And he had now the drop, too, for the other had lowered his gun, expecting certainly to see the sport fall at his feet, a dead man.

"Drop that gun!" was the grim order. "If you hesitate one second, I'll drop you, and don't you doubt it."

There was something about the man, as much as in the threatening guns, which caused the order to be obeyed, and Ben Crouse let his weapon fall to the ground, with a muttered imprecation as he did so.

As for the crowd, they stood gaping with astonishment, to a man.

"That is right, sir," said the sport, returning one of his guns to its place, but keeping his man covered with the other.

"Your bullets are too soft to penetrate my tough skin. Here is another, citizens, of the same size, shape and weight as the first."

He held them both up to view together.

Mayor Broadaxe, George Goss, and all the rest, simply stood and stared.

What manner of man was this, that he could resist bullets fired at such close range as that?

Verily they were nonplused.

"And now, mayor," said the sport, "you will oblige me if you will pick up that revolver and see how many chambers are empty. If only one is empty, I will beg the gentleman's pardon for my suspicion, and will not ask him to explain the mark of powder on his left hand. If two are empty— Well, in that case draw your own conclusions. What do you say, mayor?"

Miller Broadaxe had stepped forward and picked up the weapon, as requested.

It took him but a moment to examine the cylinder.

"Thar's two of ther lead pills missin'," he announced. "A man has ter state what he sees, and that's ther fact."

"And these are the two, I'll bet a dollar to a dime," declared the sport. "I am glad to know who my enemy is, Benjamin, sur-

named the Beautiful; but why you should want to kill me is more than I can understand."

"You never made a bigger mistake in your life," Crouse growled. "I did not shoot at you the first time, but I do not allow a man of your caliber to call me a liar to my head and not resent it, and I give you fair warning now that if you have not spoken for a coffin you had better do so."

"Then you do mean to kill me, eh?"

"It will not be altogether healthy for you to cross my path again, just bear it in mind."

"I did not cross your path this time, but you run up against me. I warn you not to do that again, or you may hear something drop. Shall it be draw and fire, the first time we meet?"

"Just as you please."

"I don't want to be taken unawares and shot down like a dog."

"I am no murderer. You have heard what I have to say, so look out for me, that is all."

"Well, I will try to, sir. There could be no doubt about your intention in the shot you fired at me just now. It would have been fatal, only that I had a full breath in at the moment."

"A full nothing! You are wearing a steel shirt, that is where the secret lies. I don't deny that I meant business that time, for I allow no man to call me a liar and live. Only a coward would wear a steel shirt."

CHAPTER III.

WHO WON THE BET?

THE crowd was at a safe distance.

Mayor Broadaxe was the only man who stood by.

Even Goss had taken a position conveniently near to the door of his *posada*.

Gold Guns still had one of his gold revolvers in hand, and consequently the advantage, slightly.

He smiled at the man's words.

"How much are you willing to bet that I am wearing a steel shirt?" he asked, suavely.

"I'll bet a hundred dollars!" was the quick challenge.

"Done! I don't know how I can pick up a hundred dollars any easier than by convincing you of your mistake. Come right into the bar-room here, and if you find any steel about my clothes I'll give you a thousand."

At this bold acceptance the interest and excitement were tenfold increased, and the crowd surged forward.

Scarcely a man of them but would have been willing to bet that this was only a bluff, for what could have stopped the bullets, short of a coat of mail, and a good heavy one at that?

"Hold on, though!" protested Crouse. "It may be made of something else than steel. My bet is that you have got on a metal covering of some kind."

"And my bet is that I have not," rejoined Gold Guns.

"Ef you ain't, then you must be the Old Boy himself, that's all I have got to offer," asserted the mayor, aside.

"That's what I say, too," agreed Goss.

"Show down, then!" Crouse demanded. "I'll bet another hundred that this is all brag, and that you'll back out when it comes to the pinch."

"I'll take that bet, too, acquiesced Gold Guns, "even if it is betting on a sure thing, for I have no intention of backing out, I assure you. Give him back his gun, mayor; I'll trust him not to draw again till this matter has been settled."

The Bullet-proof Sport thrust his own gun into its place and strode into the bar-room, Crouse and the mayor following and the crowd surging after them.

In about ten seconds the room was packed.

"Just give me elbow room, please," Gold Guns requested, "and I'll satisfy your curiosity and prove myself the winner of these bets."

"Git up on a table!" one man shouted. "We all want ter see!"

"That's ther ideal!" another. "Git onto a table!"

"I guess I shall have to," the canvas-clad sport complied.

He was soon mounted upon a table, in plain sight of all.

"Now," he proposed, "will you appoint a committee of two, men whose words you can rely on, to make the examination?"

"Miller Broadaxe fer one!" some fellow nominated.

"And Boss Bentford for the other," another promptly completed.

"All right, mayor; step right up here," the sport invited; "also the other gentleman, whoever he may be."

The mayor stepped on a chair and thence to the table, and another man was seen making his way through the crowd from the direction of the source of his nomination.

He was a man about fifty years old, apparently, with gray hair and beard, the latter close-cut, and a pair of keen, dark eyes. He was well dressed, wore a heavy gold chain, and looked like a substantial citizen of business. And such he was, being the sole owner of the Honeycomb Mine.

"I'll serve, willingly," he assented, on reaching the table, "for I have a great curiosity to learn how those bullets were stopped."

"I don't promise that your curiosity will be gratified, sir," returned the Bullet-proof Sport, "but I do promise to convince you that I am wearing nothing in the shape of a coat of mail."

The mine-owner mounted to the table, and every pair of eyes in the room was fixed upon the sport.

He pulled off his jacket, reached behind and unbuckled the bottom one of the three cartridge belts and removed them, together with the strap lacing that connected them, and unbuttoned his vest.

"Now, then, gentlemen," he invited, "examine me at your leisure and pleasure, and then announce your decision."

He placed his knuckles on his hips and stood with arms akimbo.

"Will you unbutton your shirt?" asked the mayor.

"Certainly, sir," the reply.

This the sport did, and placed his arms as before.

Together the mayor and the mine-owner proceeded, then, with the examination they had undertaken.

Beneath his flannel shirt the sport wore only an under-garment of fine material, and that certainly would stop no bullet.

On his body were two dark spots, showing where the bullets had struck him, but that was all. The skin was not broken, nor the garments in the least injured, far as could be seen.

"Wull, I ber darn!" cried the mayor, utterly dumfounded.

"Well you may say it," echoed the mine-owner, not any the less nonplused.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the sport.

"I am satisfied that you have on no coat of mail, sir," answered Bentford.

"Me too," echoed Mayor Broadaxe. "But, hang me ef I kin understand it. What stopped ther bullets, stranger?"

"My tough skin," was the smiling answer.

"It was the vest!" cried Crouse, who had been standing close in front of the table. "You have not examined the vest. There is where you will find the steel plates."

The examiners had felt of the vest, and did so again, while the man was speaking.

"You are mistaken, Crouse," declared

Bentford. "There is no metal of any kind here. See, it can be folded any way you wish, and it is as soft as wool. It is a mystery, and one that I would like to understand. Is the vest your protection, sir?" to the sport.

"It is," was the reply. "There is no metal in it, however."

"I don't believe it!" cried Crouse.

"Step up and satisfy yourself, then, sir," Gold Guns invited. "I want you to be convinced."

"That's what I'll do, too, sir. I made a fair bet, and I don't propose to be swindled out of my money. Will you step down, Mayor Broadaxe?"

"Yes, fer I am done."

The mayor got down from the table, and Crouse took his place.

He felt of the vest, pinched it, folded it, pulled it, weighed the corner of it on his fingers, and a look of complete amazement came over his face. It was something he could not understand.

"Well, are you satisfied?" asked the Bullet-proof Sport.

"No, by thunder, I'm not!"

"No? Then you still insist that I have on a steel shirt?"

The crowd laughed.

"My bet was that you had on a protector of some kind, and this vest is the thing; you have admitted it yourself. I leave it to the crowd to say who has won, you or I."

"That satisfies me," accepted the sport. "I am willing to let the crowd decide. Your bet, at first, was that I had on a steel shirt, which you amended to a metal covering of some kind—your very words. Now let the chosen judges say whether they found any such covering."

"We certainly did not," declared Mr. Bentford.

"But I want to see the inside of that vest, before I give in," persisted the man, doggedly. "I can't swear there ain't metal in it."

"The judges have decided that there is not," reminded Gold Guns. "Metal, as a usual thing, is hard, I believe. You have heard Mr. Bentford say that my vest is as soft as wool."

"That's so," cried the crowd. "The sport wins."

The decision was general.

"You appealed to the crowd, sir," admonished the sport, now resuming his belts and coat, "and you hear the decision. You owe me two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred!"

"Certainly; on the two bets."

"I won't pay them!" Beautiful Ben declared, savagely, his homely face taking on a fierce look. "I claim that I have won, not you."

"But you left it to the crowd."

"I don't care if I did. The intent of my bet was that you had on a protector of some kind, and you have backed down in not showing us the inside of that vest. I don't care what the crowd says."

"Then it seems that I have had my trouble for nothing. Perhaps you have not got two hundred dollars?"

"Curse you! I can cover a thousand, if you have got that much to put up."

"And I have. Do you want to bet again?"

"Yes, I do. I'll bet a thousand dollars, even money, and put it up, too, that you dare not let a man fire at you with a rifle, the distance of this room. Now take water, curse you!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TERRIBLE TEST.

It was an exciting moment.

The town of Tip Top had never seen the like before.

Every eye was fixed upon the sport, to see how he would take this challenge.

Ben Crouse smiled in an insolent manner,

and looked around at the crowd with an air of confidence.

Gold Guns made no response until he had finished knotting his silk tie, when, in the most careless manner imaginable, he said:

"Well, put up your money."

The crowd caught its breath. It could not be said that this came entirely unexpected, for the sport's silence, of a few moments' duration, had to a degree paved the way for it.

And yet, could it be that they had heard aright? Did this man really mean what he said? Would he wager a thousand dollars that he could stand before a rifle, at so short a range? The face of Beautiful Ben was not the only one that blanched for a second at the thought.

"You don't really mean it?" Crouse half-exclaimed and half-questioned.

"Money talks, sir!" the sport coolly rejoined. "If you are in earnest, put up the sugar," and he drew a roll of bills from his pocket as he spoke.

"Well, if you want to commit suicide it is no funeral of mine that I know of," assumed Beautiful Benjamin, and he opened his vest and brought out his pocketbook from the inside pocket.

"You had better call it off this time, stranger," spoke up the mayor of the town. "It will be sure death fer you to stand up before a rifle."

"Of course it will," the mine-owner believed.

"The risk is mine," answered the sport, quietly. "What gentleman will hold the stakes?"

He had counted out the required sum and returned the rest of the roll to his pocket. It was only too evident that he meant business.

"Nobody will hold 'em, stranger," declared the mayor. "Durn et all, you ar' too fine a feller to throw your life away so reckless. Put up yer money, an' I opine a treat will please ther crowd jest as well."

"And be a good deal more healthy for you," added Bentford.

"That is for Benjamin, surnamed the Beautiful, to say," ventured the stranger. "If he wants to back down and treat, I won't object."

"I back down?" repeated the challenger. "Never! If you think you can get out of it that way, you are grandly mistaken. If you want to back out and treat, that will be a different thing."

"Somebody bring the rifle," ordered the sport, grimly.

"And somebody hold the stakes," added Crouse, imitating the sport's cool manner.

He, too, had his money ready, now.

"Will you hold the rocks, Goss?" he asked, turning to the landlord.

"I had a good deal ruther not see ther performance," was the answer. "I'll do it, though, if somebody must."

"You are just the man, sir," assured the stranger. "If I get killed, Mr. Benjamin here will take care of the stuff. If I pull through, then it will be mine. Is that right, Benjamin?"

"That is it," Crouse acknowledged.

They placed their money in Goss's hands, and the interest of the crowd was now at fever heat.

"Now, produce the rifle," again requested the Bullet-proof Sport. "I am hungry, and will want my breakfast as soon as we get through with this matter. Bring the strongest shooter you can find."

There was a little delay about this, but, finally, the weapon was forthcoming, and the sport took it to examine it.

"Bring in some planks and set up a mark, and let me try it," he directed.

Which was quickly carried out.

A couple of heavy planks were placed

together at the rear end of the room, and a bit of paper was pinned on one, about breast high.

The sport took aim at the paper and fired. It was a good shot, the bullet striking the paper almost exactly in the center, and the stranger walked forward to see the effect of it.

The bullet had gone through both planks, and lodged in the side of the building, at sight of which the crowd turned away with shakes of the head, whispering among themselves.

"There is no foolishness about this weapon," averred the sport, as coolly as ever. "It ought to settle your doubts or settle me, gentlemen, one or the other. Now, whom can I get to fire at me?" looking at the pallid countenances around him to find his man.

But no one offered.

"Mayor, you will oblige me?" the stranger asked.

"No, sir!" was the emphatic response. "I wouldn't do it fer the hull stakes, stranger."

"Useless to ask you, Mr. Bentford?"

"I will have nothing to do with it, sir," the prompt answer.

"Well, we have got to get some one, or the bet will have to be off. A hundred dollars to the man who will fire the shot!" and he looked around again.

"I want a good marksman, of course," he conditioned.

There was a minute of suspense; then there was a stir in the crowd and a man pushed his way to the front.

"Al Cormack!" his name was exclaimed. He was a rough-looking customer, maybe forty years of age.

"I don't know but what that hundred will be as good to me as to anybody," he observed.

"Will you shoot?" asked Gold Guns.

"That's what I'm hyer fer," the laconic response.

"How about this fellow, mayor? Do you know anything about him?"

"He's a bang-up rifle-shot, ef that is what you ar' lookin' fer, an' I suppose it is."

"That is just what I want. Let me see you try a couple of shots at that paper, my man, to see what you can do."

The man grasped the rifle—it was a repeater, and taking only a brief aim he sent two shots into the target, in quick succession, both close to the center, and offered the rifle back to the sport.

"Keep it," enjoined Gold Guns. "You will do."

"But, that's one thing I want to have understood," the fellow announced.

"What is that?"

"Supposin' ther shot kills ye, I want ther promise of ther mayor hyer that I won't be held to answer fer et."

"I was going to talk about that myself," informed the stranger. "If I go down, you will go free, and the mayor can pay you your hundred dollars out of money I have in my pocket."

"That's all I wanted ter know. Git ready."

"But, mind you this: We know what kind of a shot you are, and if I go down and your bullet is found six inches from the mark, in any direction, this crowd ought to take you out and hang you higher than Haman—and I have no doubt but the mayor will see to it that it is done, too."

"That's what I will, by thunder!" the mayor excitedly exclaimed.

"Don't you worry about my missin' ther mark," protested Cormack, somewhat pale. "I'll plug ye jest where you say."

"All right; only it's just as well to have these little matters understood. Are you satisfied with the arrangements, Benjamin, surnamed the Beautiful? If you see anything to kick about, kick now."

"I won't do any kicking, and I fancy you

won't do much, either," was the sullen response.

It was evident that Crouse did not like the way the sport handled his name.

"It is just possible that you are right," Gold Guns rejoined.

Meantime he was making ready. He had buttoned his coat, and had pinned a small piece of white paper squarely in the middle of his breast.

He now walked to the opposite end of the room and placed himself with his back to the planks, feet close together and arms straight down by his sides, and announced that he was ready.

Not a man in the crowd but was white to the lips, and a pin might have been heard to drop.

The marksman raised his rifle and took aim.

There was a brief moment of suspense—it seemed an age, almost; then the rifle cracked and the stranger was seen to fall backward against the planks.

With one simultaneous gasp of horror the crowd sprung forward, but a smile upon the sport's lips immediately reassured them, and recovering his balance, Gold Guns said, lightly:

"A pretty good shot, Mr. Cormack. I'll take the stakes, landlord, if you please; and then for some breakfast."

CHAPTER V.

PLANNING A REPRISAL.

THE overwrought feelings of the crowd now found vent.

There broke one wild, ringing cheer for Gold Guns, the Bullet-proof Sport!

He was king of the camp at one bound, and stood head and shoulders above every other man in popular estimation.

As for Crouse, he could only stare at him in bewilderment.

Near the center of the white target on the man's breast was the mark where the bullet had struck, and the bullet lay on the floor, shaped similar to those that had been fired from the revolver.

George Goss stepped forward and put the money in the sport's hand.

"You have won it, fair enough," he said; "no chance for a kick this hyer time, I reckon."

"I guess you are right, sir," Gold Guns returned. "I didn't expect to give an exhibition this morning, but I was in a manner forced into doing it. I hope you are satisfied, sir," turning to Beautiful Ben.

"I haven't raised any objections, have I?" the homely man snarled.

"For the reason that there is no room for any, I take it," was the smiling rejoinder.

The Bullet-proof Sport then looked around for Mr. Cormack, and paid him the price agreed upon for firing the shot, which the fellow received thankfully.

"I'm glad I didn't kill ye," he said, but, darn me ef I didn't feel like a murderer when I was takin' aim at ye. What is this hyer old world a-comin' to, anyhow, when bullets ain't no good no more?"

The sport smiled, making some passing response.

In the mean time the mayor and the mine-owner had been examining the bullet, which the mine-owner had picked up from the floor.

They now requested the privilege of examining the spot where the bullet had struck, which the sport readily granted. He had not yet removed the paper target from his coat.

"Hang me ef I kin understand it," asseverated the mayor, "but et is a fact none ther less."

"There is no doubting that," agreed Mr. Bentford. "See, the bullet cut a hole in the paper, pasting the removed portion fairly into the fabric of the coat."

This was true, and it required scraping

with a knife to remove it. The fabric of the garment, however, was not injured in the least, so far as could be detected, save for a slight discoloration.

"Tell us ther secret of et," the mayor urged.

"Yes, let us know how it was done," coincided the mine-owner. "I would willingly give a thousand dollars to know."

"That is something that I am not free to disclose, gentlemen," answered the sport.

"Is it a discovery of your own, sir?" asked Mr. Bentford.

"No," was the answer; "the secret belongs to a friend of mine, and I am pledged to keep it."

"That settles et, then," from the mayor, resignedly.

"However, who will take his morning biters at my expense?" the Bullet-proof Sport invited. "Landlord, just set it up for the house, and I will foot the score after breakfast."

The crowd surged to the bar immediately, and were soon drinking to the sport's good health and long life.

Ben Crouse, however, declined the invitation and left the room.

Tip Top now had a sensation; the one topic of conversation was the wonderful exhibition the crowd had witnessed.

It was something no man among them could understand. What had stopped the bullets, where there was apparently nothing capable of stopping them, was more than they could comprehend.

Cormack, as soon as he had partaken of the poison freely dispensed, left the Little Turtle and bent his steps in the direction of the stamp-mill of the Honeycomb Mine, in which direction he had seen Beautiful Ben set out.

On reaching the mill, he found Crouse standing on the opposite side of the building, looking toward the mine.

"Don't et beat ther deuce!" Cormack exclaimed.

"It beats the very devil!" Crouse confessed, with equal emphasis.

"How d'ye count fer et?"

"I don't account for it at all. I know that I'm a thousand dollars out of pocket, though, curse him!"

"You'll have to get that back again, somehow, Ben. I thought you had a dead sure thing against him, when you offered that bet; didn't you?"

"I certainly did."

"And I expected that rifle would bore him clean through and through, when I fired. What kin he be made of, anyhow?"

"I don't know, but I took notice of one thing."

"What was that?"

"That he put the target right on the middle of his breast, and warned you not to miss it by six inches."

"Hal that's so; so he did. An' from that you argue that a rifle-shot anywheres else would be pretty-most-likely ter plug him, hey? I don't know but you ar' about right."

"That is just what I think, Al."

"But, that first shot took him in the side, you remember."

"Not so very far around, and besides, that was fired from a long distance, apparently."

"Well, ef somebody has warned him not ter come hyer, or to speak fer his coffin if he did, like he says, he had better look out, or he may git his dose yet, ef that somebody means business."

"I think you are right. I do not mean to let him get away with that thousand dollars if I can help it."

"Don't blame ye, but bless me ef I see how you ar' goin' to get et."

"There will be a way, I fancy."

"I hope so."

"You got a hundred of it, so you ought to feel quite friendly toward this stranger."

"No, you ar' wrong there, Ben; he was to pay me anyhow, an' he has got your thousand all in a lump yet. My hundred came out of his own thousand."

"Well, maybe you are right."

"And I'll tell you what I'll do, Ben. You give me a hundred out of yours, and I'll do what I kin to help you git et back. This hyer sport is nothin' ter me, you must 'member."

"All right; I'll do that. You stand by me, and if we get the thousand back again I'll give you the hundred out of it. But, we'll have to think of a plan, first, before anything can be done."

"Yes, that's so, and you will have to do the plannin'."

"I'll do that; you get as friendly with the fellow as you can, in the mean time."

"Yes, and you look out and don't run up against him hard, either, fer I take et he is somethin' of a cactus burr, even sayin' nothin' about his bein' bullet-proof. He's cooler'n ice."

"I am not afraid of him."

"Didn't he say somethin' about drawin' an' firin' the first time you met?"

"Yes, and I told him just as he pleased about that, but I take it he will not do that unless I reach first."

"Well, then, don't reach, fer he could plug ye twice while you was lookin' fer a spot to take aim at. And of course you wouldn't take him unawares, like he mentioned."

"Assuredly not."

"But, I can't git over et, to think that he don't wear no steel shirt, nor nothin' like that, an' yet turns away bullets like he does."

"We'll have his secret before he leaves this town, Al, don'tayou doubt it. I am going for my thousand, and we'll go for the secret at the same time. Why, that thing, patented, would make us millionaires!"

"Maybe it is patented already."

"No, or he would have no object in keeping it a secret."

"Then if we could steal et an' git in ahead with et, we would be right on top of ther pile!"

"Say nothing about it. Don't even think about it. You just keep sober and leave it all to me. Be ready when I want you, that's all."

"All right, you kin rely on me, you bet. An' now I'll go right back to ther Turtle, an' ef that treat ain't all done with I'll come in fer another pull at ther black bottle. So long."

So they parted, and Cormack returned to the hotel.

What would come of it?

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORY OF A MURDER.

AFTER breakfast Gold Guns lighted a cigar and took a stroll through the town.

He was an object of interest and curiosity wherever he went, and men pointed him out to one another without any attempt at concealment.

Nor were their words so low that they escaped the sport's ears in every instance, either, but he passed right along, in his leisurely way, paying no attention, as if oblivious to it all.

When he reached the limit of the town, he continued on down the gulch for some distance.

At length, when his cigar gave out, he stopped, lighted another, and began to retrace his steps, and by the time he got back into the town center again he had consumed an hour.

He did not stop at the hotel, but strolled on until he came to the office of the Honeycomb Mine, where he entered.

The mine-owner was there, seated in his office chair with his heels on his desk.

He, too, was taking satisfaction out of a fragrant Havana.

"Ha! is it you, Sport?" he greeted. "Glad you have dropped in. Help yourself to a chair."

"Yes; I thought I would come in for a few minutes and have a chat, if you are not too busy sir," the bullet-proof visitor responded.

"I've got all the time there is, sir, and you are welcome to it."

"The fact of the matter is, Mr. Bentford, I am here on business. Are we safe from being overheard?"

Gold Guns had drawn up a chair and seated himself within a few feet of the mine-owner, and Bentford now looked at him searchingly.

"Yes, no one can hear what we say, unless some one happens to come in, and in that case we can choke off. What is the nature of your business, sir? Is it something important?"

"It is concerning a murder that was done here some time ago."

The mine-owner's feet came down instantly from his desk, and he sat bolt upright.

"Who the deuce are you?" he demanded.

"The man you sent for, sir?"

"Deadwood Dick, Junior?"

"At your service!"

The mine-owner was all excitement, but the other was as unconcerned as if they were merely comparing the merits of their cigars.

"You amaze me, sir," the mine-owner confessed. "I would never have taken you to be that great detective. I did not look for you in any such role as this, sir, and I am afraid it will tell against your success on this case."

"I hardly think so, sir. The fact of the matter is, I seldom do appear in a place in the manner in which I might be expected."

"But, you have made yourself so conspicuous, sir."

"Do not be troubled about that, sir; it was a part of my plan, and I will make it all serve the end I have in view."

"And that end is—"

"The unraveling of this mystery, if I can do it."

"Well, I hope you can do it; but I have little doubt about the guilt of the prisoner, myself."

"So you hinted in your letter. Still, you must have some doubt, secretly, or you would not have considered it worth while to look into the matter further."

"You do not understand the situation yet, sir."

"That's true; I do not. I am here for the purpose of getting a full understanding of it."

"It was at the earnest solicitation of my daughter that I sent for you."

"Your daughter, eh?"

"Yes. She had heard about you, somehow, and she insisted that I should send for you and put the matter into your hands. She has been eagerly awaiting your coming."

"Well, I am here; and now for the particulars."

"Will you hear them from me, or from her?"

"From you, sir. But, first, who was it that knew your daughter wanted you to send for me?"

"I am not aware that any one knew about it, sir. I wrote to you, when she really insisted upon it, and that was all there was about it."

"Nevertheless, some one else knew about it, as well as of the fact that you had written. The same mail that carried out your letter, carried also one that gave me warning not to come here."

"You astonish me, sir."

"Both letters were dated the same day, both bore the same stamp-date, and both reached me at the same time."

"And who was the other from?"

"I do not know. It is hard to tell whether it is in a woman's hand or a man's, and it tells me that if I come to Tip Top I must speak for my coffin."

"And that is the reason you wear this bullet-proof outfit?"

"Lucky for me that I did wear it, sir."

"That's true enough. But, you have openly declared the fact of your having been warned to keep away from here, and that really gives notice to your secret foe that you are here."

"Just what I intended, sir. But, it seems it would have made little difference anyhow, for the person recognized me on sight."

"Well, that's so."

"I hardly looked for that, and by declaring that I had been warned to stay away I wanted to draw him—or her—out from cover. What do you think of your man Crouse?"

"Pretty hard to believe him guilty, sir."

"How long has he been in your employ?"

"Several years."

"As superintendent?"

"No; he was promoted to that position on the death of Dean."

"Man of good character?"

"Far as I have any knowledge, sir. He is a very stern fellow, one whom no man here cares to cross, just the kind of a man to govern a lot of rough miners like these of the Honeycomb Mine. In that respect, he is even better than Dean was, I am satisfied."

"Well, about the case in point. Give me the particulars of that, now, if you please."

"It can be briefly stated, sir. On the morning of July fifth, Amos Dean, superintendent of the Honeycomb, was found murdered in his shanty near the mine. The shanty has since been removed."

"On the Fourth we had something of a jollification here in town, and the boys made things lively all day and the greater part of night as well. Many of them got pretty well corned, as we sometimes call it, but Dean was not of that number, although it was pretty certain that he had been drinking a little."

"In the early part of the evening he had a quarrel with Jack Wildmoor, who was my bookkeeper, paymaster and handy man in general. It has been shown that Dean was the one who began the trouble. Wildmoor was not a drinking man, and on his part nothing could be laid to that score. And, I am sorry to have to say, my daughter was the subject of the dispute."

"You see, Amos and Jack had both been paying some attention to her, which I thought nothing about, merely inferring that she was simply herself agreeable to them, but it now comes to light that she really cares for Jack, and will not believe him guilty, spite of all the proof against him. The quarrel arose over some attention she had shown to Jack that day, to which Amos took exception and for which he called Jack to account."

"The witnesses said that strong language was used, and that threats were made on both sides. They would probably have resorted to some pistol practice, had they not been separated by the friends of both when they came to a scuffle in front of the hotel. Dean was hustled off to his shanty, where a couple of men remained with him until he fell asleep, when they left him, and that was the last time he was seen alive, save by his slayer. Wildmoor, meanwhile, had gone to his room at the hotel, and to bed, it was supposed."

"He was seen, however, to leave the hotel at a late hour, in a quiet manner, returning in about twenty minutes and going as quietly to his room again. It was the landlord, Goss, who saw him, and George's word is to be relied on every time. Well, in the morning Dean was found dead in his shanty, lying just where the two men had left him, on the bed, with clothes and boots on, and on the

floor was found a bunch of keys known to belong to Wildmoor. A visit was paid to Jack's room immediately, and there, in a drawer of the stand, was found a knife, wrapped in a paper, with blood on the blade. And, when arrested, blood was found on his sleeve."

CHAPTER VII.

SOME POINTS.

JOHN BENTFORD stopped at that point, as if to note the effect of what he had told.

The Bullet-proof Sport, as we may as well continue to call him, had been paying close attention, but his thoughts were not to be read in his face.

"And that is all?" he asked.

"That is all, sir," said the mine-owner.

"Wildmoor claimed that he was innocent, I take for granted?"

"Yes; showed great surprise when arrested, and stoutly maintained his innocence."

"He admitted having been out of his room?"

"Yes."

"Before, or after it had been shown that he was out of his room during the night?"

"It was after Goss had given that bit of evidence."

"What explanation did he make?"

"Said he missed his keys, and thought he had lost them where he and Dean had the scuffle."

"Did any one see him looking for them there?"

"No."

"And what about the knife with which the deed was done? What had he to say about that?"

"It was a knife he had in the office here, and he kept it in one of the drawers over there by the desk. He said it was there the last he knew anything about it."

"And what said the jury?"

"That he must have come here to the office, got the knife, gone to the shanty and killed his rival, and then put the knife where it was found. The keys lost in the shanty were the keys of the office."

"A pretty strong case, that's sure."

"It is so strong that I don't see how you are going to make anything out of it, Mr. Bristol."

"Call me simply Gold Guns, if you please, sir," requested the Bullet-proof Sport. "Do not let it be known that you are aware who I am. My identity is known only to two persons here."

"And who is the other?"

"Why, the man who fired at me, and who warned me not to come here."

"The man, you say? I thought you said the writing was such that you could not say whether it was man or woman."

"I should have said the person."

"Yes, I might have guessed, had I applied my thinker. But, all right; I'll take care not to mention your name again."

"And you think Wildmoor is guilty?"

"I don't see any room for doubt, sir."

"But, without the proof, would you think him capable of such a deed?"

"No, I certainly would not. Still, when jealousy is the passion there is no telling what a man will do."

"And where is the prisoner?"

"In jail, at the county seat, awaiting his trial."

"Oh; I thought he had been tried and found guilty, from what you said about the jury."

"That was the coroner's jury, sir. His trial is to come off in about three weeks. You see, you will not have much time in which to clear him. You will have to hustle."

"If I cannot do it in less than three weeks, I cannot do it at all, sir."

"I do not see how you can brush away the damning evidence."

"Nor do I, as yet, but the way will open."

"Then you are inclined to think he may be innocent, after all?"

"I know he is innocent, sir."

"You know it?" with much surprise.

"Yes."

"How do you know it?"

"That warning letter is the proof of it. The one who wrote that, the same one who fired that secret shot at me, is the murderer."

"Well, if you are not mistaken, my daughter must be right after all. Do not leave anything undone, in getting at the truth of it, Gold Guns, no matter where the trail leads."

"That is what I am here for, I believe."

"Yes; and, whatever is incurred, in the way of expense, just draw on me as you go along."

"I won't find it necessary to do that; we'll settle when I am done. By the way, how far is it to the place where Jack Wildmoor is in jail?"

"About thirty miles."

"That is quite a distance. I would like to talk with him, but I guess I will not take the trouble to go there unless something turns up that makes it absolutely necessary."

"I hardly consider it necessary, sir, for he has told me everything he had to tell, and I do not believe he could tell you any more. I can probably answer any question as well as he could do himself. Still, go by all means, if you think it of any use."

"No, you are right, no doubt; you can answer just as well—you or your daughter."

"My daughter?"

"Yes; for, since there was love between the two, she may know something that will be useful to me, and yet which does not seem to be of any importance in her sight. I must have a talk with her."

"You are right, sir, as I can see. Well, set your own time, and I will take you to my house and introduce you."

"Very well— But, perhaps this is she."

The bullet-proof could gaze out of a window from where he sat, and he saw a young woman approaching.

The mine-owner looked.

"Yes, that's my daughter," he declared.

"Well, just a question or two before she comes in: Who was it discovered the crime on that morning?"

"It was Ben Crouse."

"And how came he to discover it?"

"Why, being second in charge at the mine, he went to learn what was the matter when Dean did not come out."

"I see. That was natural enough. But, do you consider it possible that this man Crouse killed Dean, and then made the discovery in order to turn suspicion away from himself?"

"I can hardly think that of him, sir; but still, it is all a mystery. It is for you to determine."

Just then the door opened, and Clarice Bentford entered the office.

"Who is this gentleman, papa?" she immediately asked.

Bentford looked at her in something of surprise, as if this was out of the usual, for her.

She was a good-looking young woman, with regular features and fine, dark hair, and was apparently about twenty years of age. She was tastefully and serviceably dressed, and made a neat appearance.

"It is the man we sent for, Clarice," was the response. "Mr. Bristol, let me introduce you to my daughter."

Dick acknowledged the introduction like a prince.

"I thought it must be you," the young lady avowed. "I heard the people talking about you, and the thought came to me that it was about like some of Deadwood Dick's strange doings."

"Well, it is I, so your guess was correct. But, let me caution you, as I have cautioned your father, against calling me by name. Let me be known to you simply as Gold Guns—for the present, at any rate. Your father and I were just talking about you."

"Yes?"

"Yes; and I want to learn everything I can about Mr. Wildmoor, and especially anything that will tend toward proving his innocence."

"And I have told him everything I know, or about everything," spoke up the mine-owner. "If you know anything that you have not mentioned to me, Clarice, let Gold Guns have it."

"And how am I to know how much papa has told you?"

"Well, he has told me the whole story; but as there was something of love between you and the accused man, I thought perhaps you could disclose something more; some little confidences that may have bearing upon the matter. Do you think you can?"

"If I could, I would be only too glad to do so, sir; but, I can think of nothing that I have not already disclosed."

CHAPTER VIII.

WAS CROUSE THE MAN?

THE Bullet-proof Sport noticed that Bentford appeared eager to hear what his daughter would answer, for he watched her closely, after the question which Gold Guns put, and when she had answered he made haste to say:

"If you know anything, Clarice, do not hesitate to speak out. You are so confident that Jack is innocent you must help to prove him so."

"And I mean to do so, papa, if it is in my power. I know Jack did not kill Amos Dean, in spite of all the proof that has been arrayed against him. I will never believe it."

She spoke with the strength of conviction and determination.

"What makes you so positive on that point?" inquired Gold Guns. "Is it simply because you love him?"

"No, sir; I am not blinded by that. It is because I know him well, and I know he would not be capable of such a deed. He would have fought Dean fairly, I doubt not; but murder him, never!"

"Do you suspect any one else?"

Her father watched her as closely as did the detective.

"There are many persons I would sooner suspect of such a deed than Jack Wildmoor."

"Will you name one?"

"I could not think of doing that, sir, with nothing of proof against any one."

"Well, it is not to be expected. But, let me ask you, what do you think of Ben Crouse, in this connection?"

The detective noticed that the girl gave a start.

"Do you suspect him?" she questioned.

"Well, I will not swear that he is innocent, Miss Bentford."

"But, it was he who made the discovery, and he worked as hard as anybody to get at the truth."

"Perfectly natural, if he himself did the deed. I do not say that he did do it, mind; I am merely looking at it in a fair and square way. What do you think?"

"Well, I will confess that I could more readily believe him guilty than Jack Wildmoor; and, in saying that, I am trying at the same time to lay aside the fact that Jack is anything to me."

"I understand."

"But, what made you mention him, sir?"

She was given the points in the matter as known to the reader.

"Well, it does look that way," she admitted thoughtfully. "But, there is one thing I want to say, and it is this: Get at

the truth, no matter where the crime must be fastened!"

"That is just the request your father has made of me," advised the detective, "and I certainly mean to get at the truth of the matter, if I can. This is all for the present. I suppose I have leave to call on you at your home, if I deem it necessary?"

"Certainly, sir."

"By all means," supported Mr. Bentford. "Now that you are here on the ground, and have undertaken the case, you must leave no stone unturned. And the more so, as you yourself are of the opinion that Jack is innocent."

"You have heard me speak my determination, sir. And now, lest something be suspected, I will take my leave," and Gold Guns bowed and withdrew.

There was more importance in the conversation he had just had than he could discern at that time.

Later, some of words that had been dropped would come to him with more of force, and he would then discover in them something of a hidden meaning, perhaps. He saw nothing of it at that time.

He lighted a fresh cigar, and sauntered back again to the hotel.

The duties of the day had taken away the crowd, and he found the bar-room almost deserted.

Proprietor Goss had just finished sweeping out, and the room was fresh and tidy. He was just about sitting down to rest when Gold Guns entered.

"Hillo!" he greeted. "Been viewin' the town?"

"Yes; I have been taking a look around," was the careless response. "Have just been having a chat with Mr. Bentford."

"Interested in minin'?"

"Not particularly so; he was telling me about a strange murder that was done here some time ago."

"Oh, yes; strange case, that. That is, it was strange that Jack Wildmoor would do such a thing, for it wasn't thought of him. But, there's no doubt of his guilt, I reckon."

"Not a shadow of doubt, by the appearance of things. I believe you are the man who put the clincher on him."

"Well, I suppose I am, and I don't know but what I would have been tempted to hold back that bit of evidence, if it hadn't got out before I knowed really what was up."

"How was that?"

"Well, you see they questioned me about his movements before I had heard that Dean had been killed."

"Who was this?"

"Mr. Bentford, Ben Crouse, and the rest of 'em."

"And then you were sorry you had let it out, eh? But, it should have been told, for a man guilty of a crime like that ought to suffer for it."

"Yes, of course; but then, I liked Jack mighty well, and, as I said, I believe I would have kept my head shut tight, for there was enough against the poor devil as it was."

"You are about right, there. However, it is nothing to me, and I have got my own life to look after just now."

"Ha! ha! Your life is safe enough, I guess, since you are bullet-proof."

"The next bullet may take me in a spot that is not protected, however, and you heard what that man Crouse said."

"Yes, I heard; but Ben would not take you without givin' you half a chance, I don't think. He is a passionate cuss, hasty when he is crossed, and dangerous, too, but I wouldn't believe that of him."

"Then you think he is not the man who fired that secret shot at me?"

"I had forgot that fer the minute. You did seem ter put that onto him, sure enough. Still, et ain't like Ben."

"But, he let go at me without much

warning when he fired at me there by the steps. He certainly meant business that time, and that seemed to confirm the suspicion I had."

"Wull, et did look that way, that's true."

"But you are of the opinion that he did not fire the first shot."

"I would have ter see him do it, to believe it, that's all I kin say. Fact is, I heard him swear afterwards that he didn't do it."

"Well, I hope he did not. I hate to have a suspicion of a man and have to be on the lookout for him all the time. Has Crouse any enemies here in the town that you know of?"

"Well, there's some that don't like him."

"For what reason?"

"Well, they are mostly men he has discharged from the Honeycomb since he took charge there."

"I would like to fall in with a couple of those fellows, if they are square men."

"Some of 'em are square enough, but rather lazy, I reckon, all round."

"You might mention a couple of the best of the lot."

"Well, there ain't more'n three or four, that I kin think of. There's Dan King, Bud Hogan, an'—"

"That's enough."

"You don't mean to put up no job on Crouse?"

"Not by any means. I take it that he is a friend of yours, by the way."

"Well, he is one of my regular boarders hyer, but I thought a good deal more of Jack Wildmoor."

"You certainly wouldn't have thought Crouse guilty of killing Dean?"

"No more'n I would 'a' thought Jack guilty, ef it hadn't been fer the proof that was piled up against him."

"No, I'm not going to do any underhand work with Crouse, or any other man, for that matter. All I am after is to find out who fired that cowardly shot at me this morning."

"Well, I hope you find out, fer it was a dirty trick, no mistake. Dan King will be a good man to keep an eye open fer ye, if that is what you want, fer he is no fool, but you will have ter make him sign a ironclad 'greement not ter monkey with no tanglefoot."

"I guess that part can be arranged all right. You will make no mention of our little talk, of course."

"Sartainly not, stranger."

CHAPTER IX.

GOLD GUNS TAKES HELP.

DEADWOOD DICK little cared whether he did or not.

If Crouse came to know that Dick had employed a sort of guard, as it were, he would be wary.

The Bullet-proof Sport had good reason to believe that the next shot which was fired would be aimed at a spot where his bullet-proof garments would afford no protection.

He had good reason to believe Crouse guilty of having fired the first shot.

And then, too, there was some reason to believe him guilty of having killed Amos Dean.

By his death Crouse had been promoted to the position of superintendent of the mine, with a good round salary attached.

Being in the employ of Bentford, in that high position, it was probable that the mine-owner had mentioned to him something about having sent for Deadwood Dick, or his intention of sending.

Now, there was no one to fear the coming of a detective but the man guilty of the crime.

After his talk with the landlord, Dick paid a visit to the Rosebud Saloon, which was the leading resort of the kind in Tip Top.

Here were a few more loungers than at the hotel, but by no means a crowd.

This town of Tip Top was a busy place, and only the drones were to be found around at that hour of the day.

There was a stir the moment the Bullet-proof Sport entered.

He stepped to the bar.

"How many present will crook elbows with me?" he invited.

"I don't believe thar is ary galoot hyer that's mean enough to refuse," one man spoke up at once.

And he was about right; there was a scramble for the bar immediately, and all ranged themselves along its length as closely as pigs at a trough.

The man who had made the remark quoted stood next to the sport.

"You kin bet your life we ar' on call, every time, Gold Guns!" he now said further. "We ar' the tip top boys of Tip Top town, you bet!"

"Yes, you seem to be pretty decent people here, that's true," the Bullet-proof Sport rejoined. "Call for your choice poisons, gentlemen, and drink to my good health and long life—especially the latter."

"You bet we will!"

The bottles were passed along, and the imbibers were not stingy of the liquor by any means.

"You see," Gold Guns explained, "some fellow here is gunning for me, and it is not certain that he won't get his game, if he keeps on the trail long enough. But, I hope not."

"No danger from him, sence his bullets ain't no good," spoke the man next to Dick.

"He may strike a tender spot the next time."

"Ain't gittin' skart, be ye?"

"Not exactly that, but it isn't pleasant to know that you are the target for some fellow's pistol practice."

"No, I s'pose not."

"And the more especially as you don't know who that fellow is."

"Yes, that's the fact. Wull, hyer's to yer good health an' long life, anyhow, sport, 'specially ther latter."

They took their medicine like men who were used to it, and turned away from the bar smacking their lips and wiping their mouths on their hands or upon their shirt sleeves.

"By the way, what's your name?" Dick asked, of the next to him.

"Dan King," was the response, "and not ashamed of it, either."

"That's a good, worthy name, anyhow, and you seem to be worthy of the name. Let's sit down and have a chat."

"You can't please me better, pard."

The rest of those present looked at King with something of envy, and the Bullet-proof Sport noting it, did not immediately devote himself to King alone.

"By the way, boys," he said, addressing them all, "I wonder who it is that's bent on spilling my claret for me?"

"Give et up," answered one fellow.

"Well, I would like to know. I'll tell you what I'll do."

"And what is that?"

"I'll give a hundred [dollars to the man who will find out for me, and give me proof of it at the same time."

Not a man of them out would willingly undertake to earn the reward, for the mentioned amount made their mouths water—they probably associated it with the quantity of liquor it would buy.

They looked at one another, but it was quite probable that there was not a man of them all who had sufficient caliber for the task.

"I opine we'd like to gather that in," spoke one.

"All right; you shall have it if you earn

it," the sport promised. "If you take the man in the act and bring him to me, then I'll make it double."

"That's fair, by shootin'!"

Gold Guns now sat down by one of the tables with Dan King.

"I said that to pacify the crowd," he said.

"You are the man I have picked out of the lot for a little detective work, if I can trust you."

He spoke in a low tone, quite in confidence.

King looked immensely pleased, for that word detective tickled his vanity wonderfully.

"I'm yer man," he said.

"You think you can do that kind of work?"

"I kin try et, anyhow."

"You look like a pretty smart kind of a man, but you must keep John Barleycorn out of the way while you are at work for me."

"Oh, I'll do that, you bet!"

"Yes, you say so, but will you?"

"I swow I will!"

"Well, see to it that you do."

"And what is my work to be?"

"You know Ben Crouse, of course."

"Yes, curse him!"

"Then you don't like him?"

"None too well, I don't. He's too big fer his boots, sence he got ter be super."

"Then, perhaps, you had better not undertake what I want you to do."

"Why not?"

"Because, if you don't like the man, you might be tempted to go against him in a way not exactly fair. I don't want anything of that kind."

"No, I wouldn't do that. Et wouldn't be healthy, I kin tell ye, to make a charge against him that ye couldn't back up with the proof. All the same, I believe he is the man that shot at you."

"You do, eh?"

"You bet."

"And what makes you think so?"

"Because you had ther proof against him as dead straight as could be."

"He denied it, however, and that is just the work I want you to undertake for me. I want you to shadow Ben Crouse."

"I kin do et."

"Can you do it so that he will not suspect?"

"Yes."

"All right, then; that is your work, and I'll give you five dollars a day, and the reward besides, if you win that."

"I'm yer man."

"But, you are to make no mention of this to anybody, for that might spoil my game and knock you out of the reward. Don't let anybody suspect what you are doing, you know."

"You kin trust me, Gold Guns."

"All right; it is a bargain. I want you to watch Crouse every minute, and if another shot is fired at me we will know whether he did it or not."

"Exactly. I'll stick to him closer'n a Injun to a bottle."

"And, if you find him taking a too-deliberate aim at me, manage to disturb his aim at the right moment, for a bullet in the eye would not be conducive to longevity, you see. That is all; we'll chat about something else for a time, and then I will leave you."

CHAPTER X.

SOMETHING REMARKABLE.

WHEN finally Gold Guns took leave of King and the saloon, he returned to the Little Turtle.

There he idled away the time until dinner was ready, when he trooped into the dining-room with the rest of those who partook of Goss's "feed-trough."

Ben Crouse, "surnamed the Beautiful,"

as the Bullet-proof Sport rendered his qualifying appellation, not leaving the mine till sharp noon, was later than the rest at the table.

His place at the board was opposite to where Dick sat.

He did not speak at first to any one, but plunged sullenly into the business of eating.

Finally he looked up suddenly and exclaimed:

"I say, Sport?"

"What is it?" Gold Guns promptly responded.

"I have been thinking over our little difficulty of this morning, and I'm willing to make up, if you are."

"Well, that's a fair offer, certainly. I hadn't ought to refuse to meet you half way, I suppose. What plan of amnesty do you suggest?"

"I own that I was rather hasty, and I'm willing to apologize for my part in the unpleasantness, if you are willing to admit that you were mistaken about my being the man who fired that secret shot at you."

All the others at the board were looking and listening with interest.

Dick was not a little amazed.

"I may as well do that, since I can prove nothing against you, sir," he fell in line.

"All right; we'll call it settled, then. I'm glad now that you had on such a bullet-proof rig, for I certainly fired to kill, when you roiled me."

"You are no more glad of it than I am, sir. The least said the sooner mended, so we'll drop it right where it is. But, it is a mystery who did fire that shot, don't you say so?"

"It is a mystery that I am willing to help you in solving."

"All right; I'll be glad if you can help me."

"I do not say that I can do much, however, but I'll do what I can. Rest assured of one thing, I did not do it."

"I take your word for it."

"The proofs you had against me were really no proofs at all. The empty chamber in my gun was caused by my shooting at a squirrel yesterday, at the mine, which I can amply prove."

"I'm glad of that, sir."

"And the fact that the two bullets were of the same size, was of little account, for most of the guns here in town are of the same size and pattern as mine."

"That is another point well taken, sir. The main reason why I suspected you was because you met me in such a surly manner here at the steps of the hotel, and appeared inclined to pick a quarrel with me. That, and the fact that you had just come out of the hotel, the shot having come from that direction."

"Well taken, sir. The fact of the matter was, however, that I was angry at being wakened so early in the morning, for I had been up late, and I felt just in the mood for a quarrel with somebody."

"There remains nothing more to be said; it is evident that I was mistaken. I am glad you have spoken out."

"I didn't want such a suspicion resting upon me."

"That is natural, being innocent. I hope we now understand each other, Mr. Crouse."

"I hope we do, and that we shall have no occasion for any further trouble. I admire you as a man of nerve, and in fact rather like you."

This was a surprise for all present, for it was not like Ben Crouse to take water, even when clearly in the wrong.

Still, his saying that he liked the sport was enough in explanation.

But, all the same, Deadwood Dick was not deceived by him, for he read behind the outward appearance that there was not entire sincerity in it.

And still he was half-inclined to believe

that Crouse was not the man who had fired the secret shot at him, and who had warned him not to come to Tip Top. What was the mystery of it all?

The dinner over, they left the room together.

"Will you take something?" asked Crouse, stepping toward the bar.

"I don't mind taking a cigar," said the sport. "That is my usual aid to digestion."

"We'll take cigars, then. By the way, drop around and see the Honeycomb this afternoon, if you have nothing better to occupy your time."

"Perhaps I will do so, but I don't promise."

They had lighted their weeds, and now they parted, Crouse with a wave of the hand.

"Have you made up, then?" asked Goss, in some surprise.

"Yes; as you saw."

"Well, I told you I didn't hardly believe Crouse done et. I'm glad you two are friends, fer I expected trouble 'fore it was settled."

"Yes, I'm better satisfied to have it this way," admitted Gold Guns.

"Did you find Dan King?"

"Yes; and I must see him again, now. You will make no mention of our talk, of course."

"Why, ter be sure not!"

But, Dick was not quite so sure that he would not. He was a little suspicious of Mr. Goss, and yet without good grounds, as he had to admit to himself.

He sauntered out to the piazza, just in time to intercept King as he passed along in the direction Beautiful Ben had taken.

He motioned the man to stop.

"I want to talk with you just a minute," he spoke. "I see you are out after your man."

"Yes, he won't git no shot at ye without my knowin' somethin' about et; you kin bet your ducats on that!"

"There is no danger now; he will not shoot at me, we have made up."

"But, durn et, maybe he don't mean et a tall."

"Yes, he will not risk it, now, even if he was the man who fired the first time."

"And you begin to think now that he wasn't?"

"I have reason to think so. Suppose he wanted some fellow to do a piece of dirty work for him, whom would he choose?"

"Al Cormack, every time."

"Then he is the man you are to watch instead of Crouse. I will take care of Crouse myself."

"All right, ef you say so."

"And I do."

"Do you think Crouse has hired Al to do fer yer?"

"I do not say that, for I do not know it, but I do not mean to give that fellow a chance at me if I can help it."

"And my pay is the same?"

"Be just the same, my man."

"All right, then."

"By the way, are you friendly with Cormack?"

"Yes, there's nothin' 'tween Al an' me; but, that don't make any diff."

"It will be more to your advantage, for you can talk with him, but mind you one thing."

"An' what is that?"

"That you do not play me false."

"Oh, I won't do that, Gold Guns, bet your life!"

"You will wish you had never been born, if you do, that is all."

"Don't let that trouble you, pard. I am not runnin' up ergainst a snag like you, if I know et."

"I thought I would give you warning, for you are a stranger to me, you see, and I am

taking a risk in trusting you at all. You do what is right, and you won't lose anything."

"That's what I'll do, pard."

"Well, go on and find your man, and if you learn anything that will be of use to me, let me know."

"I will, you bet! And all the same, you keep your eye open fer Crouse, even if he does p'tend ter be your friend now. I wouldn't trust him no furdern I could see him. He's a dangerous cuss; so be on your guard."

With that bit of well-meant advice Dan King went on his way, and ere a great while Gold Guns saw him talking with Al Cormack. Whether true or false, the fellow had begun his work in the right place, anyhow. Dick had little doubt but that he was all right.

CHAPTER XI.

A NEARLY FATAL SHOT FIRED.

DURING the next couple of hours the Bullet-proof Sport talked with several men, taking care to keep his object under cover, but he drew out all he could that might have bearing in any way upon the case he had in hand.

The general impression was that Jack Wildmoor was guilty of the murder of Amos Dean. With proof so positive, how could it be otherwise? And yet Jack would never have been thought a murderer.

And, too, the impression Goss had given of Ben Crouse was the general impression that prevailed. But still Dick did not let go his first suspicion that it was he who had fired the secret shot. Nothing but proof to the contrary would convince him otherwise.

Finally he took a stroll in the direction of the mine.

He had passed the office, and had gone about half-way from there to the mine, when he met Miss Bentford.

She greeted him, and he stopped.

"Have you been able to learn anything?" she inquired.

"Not a thing, as yet, Miss Bentford," he admitted.

"And where are you going?"

"To the mine, to kill time. Mr. Crouse has invited me to come and see the mine."

"Mr. Crouse?" in some surprise.

"Yes; he and I have made friends, after our little difficulty."

"It may be all right, but do not trust him too far. Papa likes him because he makes a good superintendent, but further than that I do not believe there is much good in him."

"I intend to be on my guard against him, Miss Bentford. By the way, is there anything further you have thought of to say to me?"

"No; nothing more than I have said already."

"I thought perhaps there might possibly be something that you would not feel free to speak about in the presence of your father."

"No, no, I think not; and yet I will emphasize one thing I said."

"What was that?"

"I said get at the truth, and put the crime where it belongs, no matter where the guilt falls."

"Have you a particular reason for repeating that, Miss Bentford?"

"Perhaps I have, but if so I can say no more."

"Then you have a suspicion?"

"Of what avail is a suspicion without proof?"

"In my hands, it might be everything. I believe that you hold the key to this whole mystery, Miss Bentford."

"Do not carry your belief too far, sir. I have said nothing to give you any grounds for such a belief. What is more, if I had a suspicion, with no proof, I would not breathe it to you."

"And why not?"

"Because, you might find it possible to remove the crime from one innocent person only to fasten it upon another."

Gold Guns smiled.

"I do not do business that way," he averred. "When I say a man is guilty no power on earth can make him innocent, for I do not make such a charge till every doubt has been removed."

"And you are noted for getting at the truth in difficult matters."

"Well, people have some such opinion of my ability."

"And I believe you will get at the truth in this case. Go ahead and bring the guilty man to justice, no matter who it may be. But, be very careful that you make no mistake. See how dark appearances are against Jack, and yet he is as innocent of the crime as you are."

The more this young woman said, the more Deadwood Dick was mystified.

Did she know something which she was holding back? This was the way it certainly looked to him.

"You speak as if you were certain the murderer was a man," he remarked.

"Well, can you think for a moment that it was a woman?"

"I have known persons of your sex who would think nothing of taking a life, Miss Bentford."

"Well, I do not know whether it was man or woman, of course; that is for you to find out. And, do not fail, I beg of you, for the life of my lover is in the balance!"

The Bullet-proof Sport had never heard her speak more in earnest than she did in saying these last words.

He was about to make response, when something struck him in the back.

Almost simultaneously the report of a rifle was heard, but Dick knew it was a bullet even before the report reached his ears.

He uttered a slight groan, and tried to place his hand on the spot where the bullet had hit; while Clarice, realizing what had happened, uttered a piercing scream.

Dick fell to the ground.

"Oh! sir! are you killed?" the young woman asked.

"It was a pretty hard thump, that time," Dick answered in low tone. "I will pretend dead for a moment."

"Thank heaven you were not killed! But, why will you pretend?"

"Another shot may follow the first, if I do not."

"I did not think of that. I will help you to carry out the deception, then."

She stooped over him a moment, as if feeling to learn whether he was dead or not; then she screamed again, calling for help.

Dick, meantime, was watching the direction from which the shot had come, to see who would first put in an appearance from that direction, but he looked in vain.

He had been standing with his right hand toward the mine office, his left toward the mine, and his back toward an open space in the gulch, where there were only a few shanties, and certainly no place for any one to hide elsewhere.

When he had first looked in the direction of the shot, a little cloud of sulphurous smoke was floating away over this open space.

But, to tell just where the shot had come from was impossible.

The shot, and the young woman's screams, soon brought men running to the spot, from the mine and from the town center.

And among the first was Ben Crouse, coming from the mine with some of his men at his heels, and he was the first to reach the scene of the supposed fatal shot, seeing a man on the ground.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Not Gold Guns?"

"Yes," said Clarice.

"And dead?"

"No, not dead," the Bullet-proof Sport now spoke for himself. "Only sleeping. Lend me your hand."

Crouse extended his hand, and Dick was immediately upon his feet.

"Where did it strike you?" Crouse asked.

"In the back."

"And from what direction?"

"There."

"Run, men, and find the cuss, then! He has not had time to make his escape! He must be among those shanties, somewhere!"

The miners started off on a run.

Dick noted that Crouse seemed deadly in earnest.

It was certain that he himself had not fired this shot, at any rate.

"So, it dropped you, did it?" he asked.

"Yes," the answer. "It was a hard one, and one meant to do up the business for me."

"And Miss Bentford was standing here with you?"

"Yes."

"Then it must have been a good marksman, to take the risk of missing you and hitting her."

"The marksmanship was fine," said Gold Guns, "for if the bullet had not been stopped it must certainly have pierced my heart. You can look for yourself."

He turned his back to Crouse.

"You are right," Beautiful Ben agreed. "It was a dead line shot, no mistake about it. Where is the bullet? Ha! here it is, flattened out more than any of the others."

"There was a big charge of powder behind it," asserted the sport. "At first I thought it had gone in."

By this time quite a crowd had reached the spot, from the mine and from the town center together, and among others was the mine-owner, who immediately offered five hundred dollars for the arrest of the cowardly assassin.

CHAPTER XII.

FORMING A RESOLVE.

THE indignation of the crowd hardly knew bounds.

Gold Guns was their hero, and they were incensed at the sedastardly attempts upon his life.

The great majority joined in the search among the shanties, and around over the section from which the shot had come, while the rest remained around the Bullet-proof Sport.

Dick was taking careful note of those present, as far as possible.

A stranger there himself, he could not tell who were absent, save the few whose acquaintance he had formed.

One of these, he found, was Al Cormack.

"Well, the next shot will do the business, undoubtedly," Dick coolly remarked.

"There must be no next shot about it!" cried the mine-owner. "The infernal wretch must be captured now!"

"You are right!" cried the mayor. "We can't have Gold Guns murdered in this hyer fashion."

"Whoever it is, the person is a crack shot," reminded Dick, "and if he gets another crack at me he will make sure of his game."

"You will have to remain out of sight," suggested Crouse.

"I am not in the habit of hiding," assured Dick. "You men who are well acquainted here can soon figure up who is missing, and make every absent man give an account of his whereabouts at this time."

"That is a bang-up idee!" exclaimed the mayor. "That is jest what we wull do, by joker!"

"A first rate suggestion," agreed the mine-owner. "Take careful note, some of you, and give the mayor a list of all you can count absent."

And a committee was appointed for that purpose without delay.

"It will be well to bear in mind, too," said the Bullet-proof Sport, further, "that the man we want is a splendid rifle-shot. I suppose you know all the crack marksmen of your town."

"Where is Al Cormack?" demanded the mayor, suddenly.

This had put him in mind that Al was not on hand, just as Dick had intended it should.

Dick thought he noted that Crouse gave a slight start, at this, and certainly he turned and looked at Gold Guns, as if to read his inward thoughts, but that he was not able to do.

Every man was looking around for Al, but he was not there.

"He must be found," the mayor directed. "Some of you go to his wicki-up and see if he is there, an' ef he ain't, don't give up till ye find him. D'ye hear? He is ther best rifle-shot in this town, by all odds."

Several men set forth at once to carry out this order.

"Will you go back to ther hotel?" asked Goss.

"I was on my way to pay a visit to the Honeycomb," admitted the sport. "I guess I will go on, if Mr. Crouse is not afraid to be in the company of a marked man."

"Come right on," Beautiful Ben invited. "I'll take all the chances of getting shot. Besides, it is not likely that another shot will be fired right away, for everybody would be ready to rush in the direction of it."

"No doubt you are right," inferred Dick. "I am glad to have a little respite, anyhow."

He raised his hat politely to Miss Bentford, taking leave of her, and set forward with Crouse for the mine, the miners who belonged at the Honeycomb accompanying them.

Mr. Bentford, Clarice, the mayor and the rest went the other way, Goss the proud possessor of the saucer-shaped bullet. He had the other three, and would add this one to the collection, of which, as yet, he had no idea concerning the real value.

He knew not the identity of Gold Guns.

"Well, what do you think about it now?" Dick asked of Crouse.

"I do not know what to think," the response. "What do you yourself think about it?"

"My answer must be about the same."

"You are a man of steel nerve, Gold Guns."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, only a man of steel nerve would dare to continue facing the danger as you do. You cannot tell what minute the fatal bullet will find you."

"For that reason there is no use trying to hide. May just as well brave it out to the end. The oftener he fires the greater the chance of his being discovered and shown up."

"But, you have said that the next shot will probably be fatal."

"It will be a miracle if it isn't."

"And that's why I say you are a man of nerve. The average man would run to his room and stay there."

"Then I am not the average, for I have no intention of doing anything of that kind. I assure you. But, what do you think about Cormack? Do you think he is the man who is after me?"

"No, I do not."

"You have a reason, of course."

"He is not that kind of a man, for I know him well."

"I'm glad to learn that of him, anyhow. Still, he did not hesitate about firing the rifle-shot at me in the saloon."

"He was paid for that, and it was at your own request. Afterward he expressed him-

self as glad that the bullet did not kill you, as you will probably remember."

"Yes, that's so."

"And it was a miracle that it did not kill you."

"It certainly would have done so, but for my protection. My friend's invention has certainly served me well."

"It is patented, I suppose?"

"No; were that the case, there would be no need for secrecy."

"I would give a good deal to know that secret, for such a suit must be invaluable."

"Yes, but a nuisance to wear. It is by far too heating, and I intend to lay it off pretty soon and take my chances without it for the future."

"Then you do not attach much value to it?"

"On the contrary, it is worth big money, if rightly handled. An army wearing such bullet-proof garments would be simply invincible. My friend will introduce it in that direction as soon as he perfects it."

"He belongs to this section?"

"No; he is an Englishman. He sent this to me in return for a favor I once did for a friend of his."

"He must have great confidence in you, sir. You have it in your power to steal his idea, patent it here, and so reap the reward."

"Yes, that's true; but he knew his man."

There was a gleam of exultant light in the eyes of Beautiful Ben.

By this time they had reached the mine, and the superintendent quickly had things in operation once more.

That done, he invited the sport into his office, which was a little affair built where its windows commanded a view of what was going on around the works, and there they took seats.

"I'm glad of this chance of a little strictly private talk with you," the sport now said.

"Yes? Well, now is your chance, then, Mr. Gold Guns."

"I have a specimen of handwriting which I would like to submit to you, to see if you recognize it."

He was looking at the man sharply as he spoke, to note what effect this would have upon him, but he discovered nothing to arouse suspicion.

"All right, I'll give you a straight opinion," Crouse promised.

"Here, then, is the paper. I have cut off everything but the body of the note; the rest is not important."

The superintendent took the piece of paper, and read:

"You are warned not to come to Tip Top. If you do, just speak for your coffin the first thing. A bullet will cut short your career before you have been here an hour, and no one will ever know who fired the shot. A word to the wise is sufficient."

"You see," advised the sport, "I carried out my part of it, in speaking for my coffin, but the other fellow has failed to carry out his part, although it was no fault of his. But, do you recognize the hand?"

"I do not, sir. Can't tell whether it is a man's or woman's. But, why was such a warning necessary? That ought to give you the clue to the whole matter. Then, who knew that you were coming here? Seems to me that it ought to be easy enough for you to clear up."

This was more to the point than Dick had expected the reply would be, and it revealed that Crouse was not lacking in insight.

He resolved to play a rather bold hand, nevertheless.

CHAPTER XIII.

DICK'S BOLD PLAY.

"THAT is sound reasoning, Mr. Crouse," the Bullet-proof Sport next observed. "But, the mystery remains all the same. The per-

son who expected me here certainly had no hand in this."

"Can you prove that?"

"Well, it does not need proving; it stands to reason."

"You are the only judge of that, since I do not know who the person is. But, who had any reason to desire you not to come here? And, it must have been a desperate reason, too, measured by the threat and the attempts that have been made to carry it out."

"You are right, Mr. Crouse. But, the only persons who looked for my coming, so far as I know, had every reason to desire me to come."

"And yet the writer of this note clearly did not."

"That's right. If I thought I could trust you, Mr. Crouse, I would take you more fully into my confidence."

"Well, you can do just as you please about that, sir. I have pledged you my help toward hunting out the fellow who is after you with such grim determination, and anything you care to say to me will be considered in confidence."

This was spoken in an earnest manner.

"Well, that ought to satisfy me, sir. You certainly seem to be friendly disposed toward me, now. I will tell you my business here. I am here for the purpose of looking into the murder case a little, to see if anything can be done toward clearing Jack Wildmoor."

"The deuce!" and the man gave a start.

"That is it, exactly; and the man who expected me was Mr. Bentford."

Here the superintendent gave still another start, enough for Dick to detect with his practiced eye.

"Who, then, are you?" the man asked.

"You pledge me your word that you will keep the matter secret?"

"I do."

"You will not mention it even to Mr. Bentford?"

"I will not, sir."

"All right, I take you at your word. I am Deadwood Dick, Junior."

For a second a pallor came over the face of Beautiful Ben, but he remained perfectly cool.

"I have heard of you," he admitted.

"You can clear up a case, if any man can, but I am afraid there is no hope for Jack. The proof against him is too strong to be brushed away."

"That remains to be seen. But, now you can see that the man who knew of my coming here certainly could have no desire that I should not come. There is still an other party in the background and I am anxious to know who it is."

"Should think you naturally would be. But, you will soon know, if your reputation counts for anything."

"I intend to know, if possible."

"And, you can count upon my help, as I have said. Now that I know who you are, I am more than ever eager to aid you. Thank God I didn't kill you!"

This was said with such earnestness that Dick could hardly doubt the sincerity of the man.

Dick had reflected before revealing his identity.

If this man was his foe, he knew who he was, anyhow, and if he was sincere in his offer of friendship, then there could certainly be no harm in letting him into his secret.

"And now that all is open between us, can you help me further than you have done already?" asked Dick.

"I do not see any way just now."

"You believe Jack is guilty?"

"I have to believe it."

"But, supposing that he is innocent: is there any one else you could suspect? Any one who would gain anything by his being hanged for the crime?"

"No one that I know of. That was one thing you had in mind when your suspicion fell upon me, I suppose, because I happened to get Dean's place when he was killed."

"I learned that afterward; I did not know you when I accused you of having fired at me."

"That's so. No, I know of no one."

"Any one who would have an object in removing Dean and putting the crime upon Wildmoor?"

"Not a soul."

"Man or woman?"

"I can suspect no one."

"Well, it is a tangle, sure enough; and yet it is certain that the slayer of Dean is alive and here in your town."

"Then you hold that Jack is innocent."

"As innocent as you are."

Dick had his eyes fixed squarely upon those of Beautiful Ben.

The man stood the test, never flinching for a second, and Dick laid it to one of two things: either the suspect was innocent, or else he was a man of steel nerves, as he had given Dick the credit of being. And the question was, which?

"Then he is certainly innocent of that deed," Crouse rejoined.

"Well, you have promised to aid me in finding the man who fired at me, what do you suggest? And your promise goes further and demands that you aid me to discover the murderer of Amos Dean."

"Which I will gladly do, for I would rejoice to see Wildmoor cleared of the charge. But, how? I am no detective."

"Well, in the first place, by observing your promise and keeping my identity secret."

"I will do that, of course."

"Then, by bestowing some thought on the matter and giving me the benefit of any ideas that may come to your mind. You have lived here and know the people; I am a stranger. You have the advantage."

"I have done all that thinking already; sir, and am prepared to give you the result in few words: There is not a soul here whom I can suspect."

"Dean had no foe?"

"Not to my knowledge, save Jack."

"And the general impression is that Jack would not have stooped to such a deed. Your citizens here would have scouted at the idea of his having killed the man, had the charge been made without proof."

"That's right, pard."

"And yet you know and I know, now, that the murderer is at large, and that he means to let Jack suffer for his crime."

"Well, it looks so, to say the least."

"And it is so; you yourself have admitted it."

"Yes, there can be no doubt of it, I guess, looking at it that way; it must be so."

"And, how are we going to get at the bottom of it?"

"You must do the plotting, for I am no good at that sort of thing. Say what you want me to do and see if I am not as good as my word."

"Very well; I will hold you to that, then. In the mean time, something new may come your way. In that case let me know of it. Even if I am Deadwood Dick, I do not despise help, be it ever so little, in a case like this."

"I'll do it, sir, I'll do it."

"That is all that can be said for the present, then."

And this was the bold hand the redoubtable Richard had resolved upon playing: He had placed himself in the hands of the man whom he had good reason to regard as his deadly enemy!

If his first thought was right, he would have to play a doubly watchful role; if wrong, he had won an able ally. He did not know which the man would prove to be.

Dick took his leave, walking leisurely.

back as far as the office of the Honeycomb, certainly proving himself the man of iron nerve we know him to be. He was an open target for another secret shot.

The shot did not come, however, and he reached the office in safety.

Finding no one there, and the door locked, he proceeded to the hotel, in the same leisurely manner, where the first man to greet him was the mayor.

"Glad you're back," Broadaxe greeted. "Wanted ter see you. That fellow Cormack can't be found, and there is beginnin' ter be a suspicion that he is ther man what fired at ye."

"Is that so? Well, have you seen anything of the fellow called Dan King?"

"No; he is another that's missin'."

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ARREST THE OUTCOME.

DEADWOOD DICK was satisfied of two things: first that Cormack was not the man who had done the shooting, and second, that King was still upon his trail.

That was to say, reasonably certain. It was possible, of course, that the two had gotten into a fight, and it might be, had disabled or killed each other. But, there was evidence against that.

One thing, King would have destroyed Cormack's aim so that the last shot fired at the Bullet-proof Sport would not have been so true.

"Are they out of town?" demanded Gold Guns.

"Yes, they seem ter be; can't find any one who has seen either of 'em very lately."

"And are these the only citizens unaccounted for?"

"Yes, ther only ones."

"Well, that does make it look bad for them. Still, we have to leave room for the possibility that this secret marksman is a stranger who is not known here, and who has not shown himself at all."

"I hadn't thought of that, Gold Guns."

"It came to me as a thought. Nevertheless, we'll look after Cormack when we sight him."

"Well, you kin jest bet we will! And if he proves up to be the p'izen cuss, I think a rope will be found that will about fit his onery neck, too, by cactus!"

"Whatever you do, do nothing in haste," admonished Gold Guns. "This is a matter in which we must make haste slowly. It appears that I made one mistake in accusing the wrong man; we must not make another."

"Wull, we'll let you have a hand in et, anyhow."

Gold Guns went up to his room to snatch a little sleep before night, for it was his intention to be up and around town the whole evening.

Night is the time, in your mining-camp, when everybody is on hand to see what is going on and to do his little part.

Reaching his room, he took a pillow from the bed and laid it on the floor, and was about to throw himself down, when something caught his eye and claimed his attention.

It was an envelope lying on the stand in the corner.

He took it up and looked at it, and at sight of the writing he gave a start.

It was addressed to him, and the hand was the same as that in which the first warning letter had been written!

Eagerly he tore it open to learn what it might contain.

It read like this:

"DEADWOOD DICK:—

"You are known; what is the use of pretending? Useless to ask Mr. Bentford, Clarice, and Ben Crouse to keep your secret, for I can make it known at any time. You

ought to be satisfied, now, that I mean business. For the last time I warn you. Go away now, and you live; persist in remaining, and you shall surely die.

"BUSINESS."

Dick ran his fingers through his hair while he studied the missive.

"It certainly does smack of business, no mistake," he mused. "Now, who was the writer of this? Not Al Cormack, that is certain. This shows a degree of education, and that fellow has mighty little or none."

"Is the writer a man or a woman? That is another question. If a man, the imitation of a woman's hand is good: if a woman, she writes a hand that borders upon the masculine. If trying to imitate that, then the production is not so good. I take it that a man wrote this."

"And that being the case, who is the man? The murderer of Amos Dean, without a doubt. Let me find the murderer, and I have the writer of this, and the reverse the same. But, he may find me first, and in that case— Well, I am not going to lose any sleep over it, anyhow. I'll take a nap and dream upon it, and maybe I'll solve the riddle that way."

He put away the letter and threw himself on the floor.

Not waiting to remove his leggings and boots, not knowing what minute he might have to fight for his life, he did not disturb the bed.

He had secured the door, and was soon sound asleep, and he knew no more of passing events until the landlord thumped his tom-tom to call his hungry boarders to the "feed trough" again.

Then the detective awoke, refreshed and ready for whatever might be next in order.

He washed up, looked to his guns, and went down.

The table was still filled, but there was still room for one, and as Dick took his place he was greeted by Crouse.

"You are still alive, Gold Guns, I see?"

"Yes, and in prime condition for supper, too," the response.

"Heard the news?"

"No; I have been sleeping."

"They have made an arrest on suspicion."

"Hal is that so? Who is the prisoner?"

"His name is Dan King."

This was news with a vengeance.

Dick did not betray the surprise he felt, however.

"And what is the proof against him?" he asked. "Do you think he is my secret enemy?"

"He may be; we can't get much out of him."

"Where is the fellow?"

"In the calaboose."

"I guess I will drop around and see him after I fill in."

"Yes, and see if you can get out of him where he was all the afternoon, or from the time when you were shot at."

"I will. And what of the other fellow, Cormack?"

"Oh, he is all right. He has been over to Boot Leg, and can prove it by nearly that whole camp, if necessary, he declares."

"Then that clears him, of course."

"Certainly."

Dick was not so sure that it did, but he wanted Crouse to believe he thought so, at any rate.

Supper finished, Dick and Crouse left the room together and sought out the mayor, who was found with little trouble.

"I hear you have got a suspect," the sport remarked.

"Wull, yes; but he swears by all that's holy he is innocent."

"What does he say in proof of it?"

"That's whar the sticker is: he won't say nothin'."

"And what do you think about it?"

"I have lodged him in ther lock-up, an' thar he will stay till he proves up, by cactus!"

"And he will say nothing?"

"Not a cussed thing."

"Well, that does look suspicious, but he may have a reason for not speaking at present."

"He sartainly seems ter have, and I'm afraid et is ther reason that he can't tell ther truth 'thout gittin' into trouble, an' ain't got ther head ter invent a lie that will pass."

"I'll go and see him, if you don't object."

"Sartainly not; that's jest what I want you to do. Come along."

"Will you go, Crouse? But, I suppose both you and the mayor have talked with the fellow, so it will be of no interest to you."

Dick wanted them to decline, for he wanted to see the man alone.

"Yes," was the response, "I'll go, certainly. If you can get more out of him than we did, I want to see how you do it."

"That's right," assented the mayor. "I think you will find him a tough nut to crack, Gold Guns, even if he is sober, which is a wonder. But, maybe that's the reason he is so stubborn."

"Better bring along a bottle of inducement," suggested Crouse.

"No, never mind that," demurred Dick.

"I'll take him just as he is and see if I can learn anything. I had rather deal with a sober man than a drunken one, at any time."

So they set forward for the calaboose, and reaching there, the mayor unlocked the door and they entered.

The prisoner was seated on a box in one corner, with his hands bound, and was looking ugly enough.

A lantern was hanging from one of the beams overhead, casting a sickly light around, for, though it was still daylight without, there was no window to the jail and it was a grewsome hole at best.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CLOSEST CALL YET.

"WULL, have ye found out yer mistake?" the prisoner growled.

"Not by a tall heap we haven't," asserted the mayor. "It is our opine that you ar' the man."

"Well, keep right on thinkin' so, will ye? When ye bring on ther proof of et, then et will be time enough fer me to talk out, I reckon. Till ye do, what's ther use?"

"Then you are innocent?" asked the sport.

"Of course I'm innocent, but they won't believe et."

"Well, you are innocent, of course, till you are proven guilty."

"You seem ter be a square feller, sport; I don't mind talkin' ter you, but I be hanged ef I will talk to Ben Crouse."

"And how about the mayor?"

"Well, he has sort o' made me mad, too. What I have got ter say I will say to you or nobody; that's my decision."

Dick turned and gave a wink to Broadaxe and Crouse, which they both took to mean that, if they would retire he, the sport, would take care of the matter.

"This is a broad hint fer us to git out, I take et," assumed the mayor. "Reckon we might as well do et, eh?"

"I suppose so," agreed Crouse, though Dick suspected that the fellow would rather remain than go. "Ther sport can decide for himself."

"Ye might jest as well," the prisoner growled at them. "It's his funeral an' none o' yours, anyhow."

The mayor and Beautiful Ben withdrew, closing the door after them, and waited outside.

As soon as they had gone Dick stepped forward to his ally.

"You have got in a fix, I see," he said, in a low tone.

"Yes, durn et," in an equally suppressed voice.

"Well, I'm proud of the way you have carried on your part, my man, and I'll stand by you and reward you well when we get through."

"Yes, I know a thing or two, pard, and I knowed I had ter keep a still head or give you away, so I kept still an' let 'em lock me up. I kin stand et a little while, I reckon."

"You have played it finely."

"So, another shot was pegged at ye, was there?"

"Yes; and it seems that Cormack did not fire it, either, by what I hear."

"No, he didn't do et, fer he was at Boot Leg about that time, an', of course, he couldn't. Was et Crouse?"

"No, it wasn't he, either. It is a mystery who it was, King, no denying it. I suppose you followed Cormack over to Boot Leg, and that accounts for your absence so long."

"That was et, pard. And, you kin set et down that he went on a p'izen piece of business, too."

"You think so?"

"I know so. He had a talk with some of ther wu'st cusses in ther camp, an' thar ain't none of 'em what's noted fer bein' angels. It means a job they ar' puttin' up on you."

"Ha! then you learned something, eh?"

"You bet! They mean ter go fer you to-night, somehow, and do ye up and get away with yer wealth."

"Well, that is encouraging news, certainly. But, I opine they will find me at home and ready to entertain them. I'll give you an extra hundred for this tip, when we settle."

"And Cormack is in it, somehow; that you can count on."

"Then you have not got hold of the full scheme?"

"No, not all of et. But, I think a gang is comin' over hyer to-night."

"But, who is this man Cormack working for?"

"If not on his own hook, then you can bet it is Crouse. Don't you bet too heavy on Crouse, Mister Gold Guns; he'll bear watchin' like a Ute."

"I am not betting on him at all."

"That is the talk! You will know him a good deal better before you leave these diggin's, I don't doubt. He served me a dirty trick that I don't forget in a hurry, and I know the kind of a man he is."

"Well, I'm going to have you out of here, King."

"I knowed you would do that, soon as you got around to it. I was waitin' fer you ter come."

"Yes, I am trusting you to the full, you see. I will tell Broadaxe and Ben that you are all straight, and that I have confidence in you. That will be enough, I think."

"Mebby et will."

"And if they question you, remain stubborn."

"I understand. And then I am to continue ter watch Cormack, and look out fer his joker?"

"Yes, do that; but, take good care, for some one may be set to watch you, now. I'll see just how good a hand you can play against their game."

"All right; I'll keep my eye skinned, you bet!"

"And that is all you have to say privately?"

"No, thar's one thing more: The bad man of ther lot that's comin' from Boot Leg, is a feller called Gorilla Gibb."

"I'll remember the name."

"And remember to look out for him, sharp. He will have some trick to play, I reckon, and he is a bad man from Uglyville. Thar ain't a man in Boot Leg kin lay him on his back, nor one as tough on the shoot."

"All right; enough said."

Dick rose, stepped to the door, and opened it.

Their talk had been in tone so low that it could not be overheard by any one.

"Mayor?" he called.

"Right hyer!" the immediate response.

"Come in, you and Crouse. It is all right with King."

"Then he has confessed?" demanded Beautiful Ben.

"No, I find him straight and all right," explained Dick. "You may as well let him go, mayor."

"What! Then you ar' willin to take ther chances?"

"Yes. He has told me his story and I know he is straight. It was a little private affair of his own, and I do not blame him for not spitting it out. I have promised not to tell."

"Wull, ef you say so—"

"Yes, let him go. I will be responsible for anything he does."

"D'ye hear that, Dan?" the mayor demanded. "Et is ther Bullet-proof Sport that sets ye free, not me."

"I know et."

"And you would be a mean skunk not to thank him for et. I ain't got nothin' against ye myself, but durn ye ef you wouldn't 'a' stayed hyer one sweet while, ef ye wouldn't talk."

"That's all right; I don't hold no grudge."

So, the prisoner's bonds were unloosed, and he was allowed to go free.

He thanked the sport, in his rough way, which seemed perfectly natural, and hurried off.

The mayor closed and locked the door of the calaboose, and he and the others retraced their steps toward the hotel, talking as they went.

The Bullet-proof Sport had his penknife in his hand, and was trimming his nails with it, when, in a very trifling way, it suddenly and unexpectedly saved his life.

He dropped it, and was bending to pick it up when the report of a rifle rung out, and a bullet grazed his neck. It was his closest call.

Man of steel as he was, he blanched for the instant.

His manner, however, remained perfectly cool, and he picked up the knife and continued trimming his nails.

The mayor and Beautiful Ben had sprung apart from him, and gazed at him in almost awe, for they had heard the whistle of the bullet unpleasantly near.

"That came near doing it," Dick remarked.

He was looking in the direction whence the shot had come, but this time no smoke revealed the place.

"Near to et!" echoed the mayor. "I should say et was! Why don't ye run fer et, 'fore he gits in another at ye? Durn et, man, you ar' committin' suicide, standin' hyer!"

"Let's walk on, then," Dick suggested. "If you and Mr. Crouse feel concern for my safety, you may walk near enough to me so that it will be impossible for my friend to pop me over without danger of finishing you off. What say?"

And the sport smiled as he made the proposition.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BAD MAN OF BOOT LEG.

BUT, the mayor and the superintendent were not made of such iron material, in regard to nerve.

They held themselves at a respectful distance, as they started on, but each had his gun out and ready to fire if there came anything to fire at.

Dick had been watching in the direction

whence the shot had come, near as he could locate it, and that was somewhere from the direction of the mine office or the buildings that way.

"It is no more than I should have looked for," acknowledged Dick. "I received another warning this afternoon, as I forgot to mention."

"Another!" from both men.

"Yes," and he took the note from the pocket of his jacket and read it.

"You see he means business," he remarked. "Now, we know that it was not King who fired, and yonder is Cormack near the hotel, where the crowd is looking to learn about the shot."

"Then who the mischief did fire it?" demanded Crouse.

"I have a suspicion, now," informed the Bullet-proof Sport. "I have been hard at work, mentally, and I am just getting it through my head."

"Tell us," urged the mayor.

"No, for I may be wrong. Wait and see. He is not likely to fire again, now, for we are out of range. If you will excuse me here, I have a call to make before it gets dark."

"You ar' 'scused, of course; you ar' your own boss."

Dick left them and turned in the direction of the cottage of the mine-owner.

They stood looking after him for a moment, wondering at the nerve that enabled him to walk so calmly in the face of such danger.

They then continued on to the hotel, talking between themselves, going over the facts before them and trying to get at the bottom of the mystery that was so exercising the citizens of Tip Top.

Gold Guns went on and to the cottage.

No other shot was fired, and he reached there in safety.

His knock brought Clarice in person to open the door, and he noted that her face was pale.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Why, what do you see the matter?" with a smile.

"You are looking pale."

"Am I? You must think nothing of that. I have turns of faintness which make me appear so."

"That explains it, then. But, is your father in? I desired to see him for a few minutes."

"No, he is not in just now."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Did you stop at the office?"

"No, but the shutters are closed there."

"Then he is no doubt at the hotel."

"I'll look for him there when I go back. Have you learned anything further, Miss Bentford?"

"Nothing, sir. And you?"

"I think I am on the right track at last."

He noticed that her pallor slightly increased, but she made a strong effort to remain calm.

"I hope you are," she said. "You know what I told you."

"What was that?"

"To get at the truth, no matter where the guilt falls."

"Yes, I certainly mean to do that. I understand your meaning now, I think, Miss Bentford."

"I hope you do. If you do, you will see that I cannot speak plainer than I have spoken."

"Your words now confirm my suspicion, and I think I am right. I may want to talk with you later."

"If you do, you will see a dim light burning in the kitchen. Come to the back door and knock lightly."

"I will do so."

Dick took leave, and returned to the hotel, where all was excitement over the latest

shot that had been fired at the camp's honored guest.

Mr. Bentford was there, and had just posted a reward offering one thousand dollars for the discovery and arrest of the secret would-be assassin. He was thoroughly aroused and grimly in earnest.

"This thing has got to end right here," he declared. "You had better keep out of sight, Mr. Gold Guns, until this camp can hunt down this fellow, for the very next shot may be fatal. You had better go to your room and stay there, and we will do our best to drag him to light."

"I thank you for the advice, Mr. Bentford," was the response, "but I cannot take it. I want to be up and around, and a fellow can't die but once, you know."

"Well, it is your own business, but I would hate to see you go under."

"I'll take my chances, sir."

It was said in the calmest manner imaginable, with nothing of brag or boast about it.

The excitement was at a white heat, and it was the general opinion that the secret rifleman was a stranger who had followed the Bullet-proof Sport to the camp, but had not put in an appearance.

It must be so, was the argument, for now every suspected man had been shown up innocent.

Even Gold Guns admitted that it might be true.

Night settled down, and the town wakened up to the usual excitement of the time.

The Rosebud was the center of attraction by night, for there the chief games of the town were run, and there the largest crowd congregated.

The place was well filled when Gold Guns entered, in company with the mayor, the mine-owner, and others, and it was thoroughly filled a minute later by the crowd that had followed from the hotel.

It was a place of the usual type.

In one corner was a piano, presided over by a woman in a much-soiled stagey costume.

There was a small space for dancing, but the greater part of the space was taken up by tables for drinking and gambling, most of which were more or less occupied.

Deadwood Dick, in his disguise, sauntered down the room, taking in everything in his usual manner.

He had his coat buttoned across at the top button.

Thus he was doubly protected against a bullet, so far as his body was concerned.

Any one coming in, and seeing him for the first time, would never suspect that he was bullet-proof; he would be taken simply for a sport in odd attire.

Dick had no thought of entering any of the games, but he stood looking on at the faro table, the chief center of attraction in the room, excepting himself—but he appeared oblivious to the notice that was given him.

He was standing at this table, looking on, when, as we started to say, a delegation from Boot Leg, headed by the formidable Gorilla Gibb, burst into the room with a good deal of noise and swagger, in a way that could not but draw attention upon themselves.

"Hyar we be!" exclaimed Gorilla, straddling his legs and placing his arms akimbo, glaring around the room as if to strike terror to every heart. "We ar' ther prime pick of ther elect of Boot Leg, and I'm ther flower of ther flock. We have come over hyar to see ther great What-is-it, ther feller what is said ter shed bullets like a duck sheds rain."

He looked around to find him.

"Whar is he?" he sung out. "Trot him out fer inspection, fer we don't mean ter be cheated, after walkin' ther hull six miles jest ter git a peep at him. Rumor has reached our ears that you have a galoot hyer that don't keer no more fer a bullet'n what he

would fer a wad out of a popgun, but we ain't goin' ter take no stock in no sech yarn as that till we see et with our own optics. D'ye understand what I'm whisperin'?"

"You needn't make so blasted much noise about et," spoke up Mayor Broadaxe. "I reckon Gold Guns ain't afeerd to show himself."

"Wull, then, let him come forth; that's what we want."

"Here I am, gentlemen, if it is me you are looking for," spoke out Dick, in his leisurely way, stepping forward.

Gorilla Gibb put his hand over his eyes, as if it were noontide and he were shielding them from the light of the sun, and took a critical view of the sport, from crown to toe.

CHAPTER XVII.

GOLD GUNS WAS THERE.

"WULL, you ar' ther critter, be ye?" Gorilla remarked, sneeringly.

"I presume I am the person you are looking for, sir," answered Gold Guns. "Are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied? Not by a heap I ain't! I told ther feller what said you ar' bullet-proof that he lied, an' I won't believe et till I see et fer myself. What say, pards?" and he appealed to the score or so of fellows who had come with him.

"It will not be necessary to demonstrate the matter further," informed Dick. "I don't care a flip whether you believe it or not, but I am not putting myself on exhibition to satisfy every man that happens along."

"Oh! ye ain't, hey?"

"Certainly not."

"Mebby you don't know who you ar' talkin' to."

"I do not care; that I will tell you. Is that all the business you have with me?"

"No, sir, et ain't! We hev come hyer to see this hyer thing tested, and we mean ter see et. Do you git onto that?"

"I understand what you say, sir."

"Wull, then, heed et."

"See here, have you come over here to get into trouble?"

"Thar needn't be no trouble, unless you ar' 'clined ter make et. You do what we say, an' et will be all right."

"Then you couldn't take the word of Al Cormack, eh?"

The shot struck home.

The expression of the fellow's face changed, and for a second he was at loss for a reply.

"What do you know about Al Cormack?" he demanded.

"I don't know how much or how little you know about him, sir, but I happen to know that he is the man who carried this news to you."

"Oh, ye do, hey?"

"Yes, and I know further that you have come here for no other purpose than to kick up a row. Now, jump right in as soon as you please, and we'll have it out and done with."

"Wull, wull, but you do talk big fer a bantam, durn me ef you don't!"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm goin' ter see ef you ar' bullet-proof, that's all, an'—"

He reached for a gun as he spoke, but before he could get it out the sport had him covered with his glittering revolvers.

"You draw that gun and I'll demonstrate to the crowd that you are not," the sport gave warning. "I can put a bullet pretty nearly where I want to, and if you don't believe it, just draw."

Gorilla Gibb was white to the lips.

"I only was foolin'," he declared. "I didn't s'pose you would think I was in 'arnest."

He removed his hand, and Gold Guns put up his weapons.

In the same instant the bad man from Boot Leg leaned forward, drawing a knife as he did so!

"Ef you ar' bullet-proof, mebbe you ain't steel-proof," he cried, as he made the leap, an' I'll see—"

There was scarce time for Dick to draw again, but he caught the knife hand of the rascal and held it as if in a vise. Not only so, but he gave it a twist that brought out a howl of pain, as the knife dropped to the floor.

Gorilla Gibb drew back his other fist and aimed a blow at Dick's face.

With a twist of his hand, however, avoiding the blow with the other at the same time, Dick brought the fellow to his knees.

The crowd looked on in complete amazement, for Gibb had the reputation of being a particularly bad and an exceptionally strong man, and this was something they could not understand. It was a marvelous display of strength.

He had the big fellow's arms twisted so that he had no choice.

"Yas, yas!" the fellow howled. "Fur ther luv of goodness let go o' my arms, an' I'll slide!"

"All right: see that you do!" and Dick gave him a push and a kick at the same time.

Out sprawled the gorilla, on his back, howling like a wild Indian.

"At him, pards!" he cried. "Fill him full o' lead! An' ef he is bullet-proof, see ef he is knife-proof, too! Go fer him!"

His followers started in to obey, but Dick's gold guns were ready for their reception.

"Yes, come right on!" he invited. "I happen to know that you came here to do me up, and now is your chance to begin. Who will be the first?"

"That is what's the matter!" cried the Mayor of Tip Top. "You galoots of Boot Leg have been throwin' stones this way fer some time, an' now ef you want ter git satisfaction out of us I reckon we'll take sides with ther Bullet-proof Sport an' 'blige ye!"

"That's what we wull!" yelled the crowd.

The men from Boot Leg appeared to have walked into a hornets' nest.

"I guess there won't be a whole lot of trouble, mayor," remarked the sport. "If you will look after the rest, I will take care of the gorilla."

At that instant Gorilla Gibb jerked his gun and fired.

The bullet struck the sport in the breast, but dropped to the floor. In the same moment Dick was upon the ruffian.

One hand was at his throat, while a gun in the other was pressed against his head.

"Drop it!" Dick ordered, savagely.

"Jest as you say," was the sullen response.

The fellow allowed the gun to fall from his hand.

"And now, mayor, I want to lodge this fellow in the calaboose," the Bullet-proof Sport announced.

"Hal do ye mean ter say he is ther man ye want?"

"He is one man I want! I am going to take care of him, since he came here to take care of me."

"An' we'll help ye do et, by cactus!" the mayor cried. "Some of ther boys will go with ye, an' ther rest of us will disarm this hyer hull gang."

"That is the idea."

A couple of strong fellows stepped forward and laid hold upon the gorilla, jerking him to his feet, and Dick getting the key from the mayor, they led Gibb forth to the lock-up.

Ben Crouse had meantime looked around, and had caught the eye of Al Cormack.

He gave that worthy a wink, and the

tough immediately left the room, quietly, with two others, and no one noted their departure.

"Shall I lend you a hand, Gold Guns?" Crouse called out after Dick.

"No, not necessary," the sport answered. "The mayor has got more to handle than I have; help him."

He saw the fellow's game, knowing what he now did.

The question also put him on his guard, and prepared him for an attack that might possibly be made.

He said to his helpers:

"Some of this fellow's friends may try to get him away from us, boys, but you hold fast to him at all cost. I'll attend to these."

"All right, Gold Guns," was the response. "We'll do anything you say, an' they'll never git him onless they put holes in us first that lets ther bleed leak out, you bet!"

The man had barely said this when a rush was made upon them out of the darkness.

The attackers did not dare shoot, for fear of striking their friend, but they came with a rush and attacked Dick and his helpers hand to hand.

"Hold to your prisoner!" Dick repeated. "I'll attend to these."

There were three of them, but the detective turned and confronted them like a lion, and he had to do it alone.

Gorilla Gibb, seeing what was up, was struggling with all his might to get away, and the two men had all they could do to hold him.

The foremost man of the three met Dick's fist on his proboscis, and down he went, not to get up again in a hurry, and the other two ran squarely up against the Gold Guns.

"Git!" cried the sport. "If you don't, I'll let starlight come into your cabezas where the red oozes out, and don't you doubt it. Git!"

And they "got." They took to their heels, leaving the fallen Cormack on the field, as it were, and, a few minutes later Gold Guns had his prisoner safely housed in the calaboose.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DENOUEMENT—CONCLUSION.

DICK then sent one of his helpers to bring the mayor at once.

In the mean time the mayor had disarmed all the rest of the crew from Boot Leg, rendering them helpless and harmless.

He soon put in his appearance at the calaboose, and Dick, having now handcuffed his prisoner, stepped outside to talk with him, and the mayor was eager to learn what was wanted.

"I want Dan King and about twenty others to guard this jug," was the first request Dick had to make.

"Et shall be jest as you say, Gold Guns," was the promise.

"Then—and this is the most particular part of all—I want you, personally, to see to it that Ben Crouse does not leave town."

"Crouse?"

"Exactly! Say nothing, and don't let him suspect, but watch him."

"All right; you know what you ar' doin', I s'pose. I'll carry et out jest as you direct, pardner."

"In the mean time, I want to have a talk with this prisoner. After that I shall have private business to attend to somewhere else. There will be a surprise in the morning."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I have got the murderer of Amos Dean, that's all!"

"Gorilla Gibb!"

"And you can give it out," Dick added, "that I will show up proof and prisoner to-morrow morning at the stone heap on the Square where I made my debut."

He had not answered the mayor's exclamatory question.

"Et shall be done, jest as you say," the mayor promised. "I'll have ther guard-gang here in ten minutes, an' I'll give et out fer all galoots from far an' near to be on hand in ther mornin'."

"And, mind the other thing: keep Crouse under your eye. I will take care of all the rest."

"Verily, hoss, not one tot or jittle will I forgit."

So the mayor set forth to carry out his part of the programme, while Gold Guns returned into the calaboose.

He was there more than an hour, talking with his prisoner, and by means of threats and promises combined, managed to get just such information as he was after.

When he had done, he came forth and went secretly to the Bentford cottage.

There was a light in the kitchen, as had been promised, and making his way to the rear door unseen, he knocked lightly.

The door was promptly opened by Clarice. Her face was pale, as before, and she could not hide her agitation.

"What have you discovered?" she asked.

"The truth, at last," was the answer. "I need only you to confirm it."

"Heavens! Then I was not mistaken! And yet, I did not dare to breathe such a suspicion. What do you want to know?"

But, impossible to quote, now.

Dick remained there about the same length of time as at the jail, and when he finally took leave he had forged the last link that made the chain complete!

Nothing remained now but the *denouement* on the morrow.

Deadwood Dick was up at an early hour, but did not show himself outside of the hotel.

He made inquiry concerning his prisoner, and found that he was still safe in the calaboose, and learned also that nearly all the citizens of the camp of Boot Leg were in town.

Everybody was up early, and the mayor soon put in his appearance at the hotel, where the Bullet-proof Sport was talking with Crouse.

"You ar' keepin' yourself close," the mayor remarked.

"Yes; I don't care to risk another shot this morning," the sport answered, smilingly.

"Risk another shot? I thought you had ther guilty man safe in limbo! What do ye mean?"

"You are soon to learn. If I went out now, I would certainly get a shot somewhere between collar and hat-brim, so I am staying in."

This rather amazed the mayor, and Crouse looked at the sport searchingly, but nothing could be read in his face. There was something mysterious in his words, as well as in his manner.

"I am going to my room for a little while," announced Dick. "Bring the prisoner to the stone pile at nine o'clock, sharp, mayor!"

He went up stairs, and watched the street and gulch from his window.

At last, when nine o'clock drew near, a smile came over his face, as he saw a signal from a window of the Bentford cottage.

He went down immediately, and in a few minutes Mr. Bentford came into the bar-room.

"Good morning, sir!" the Bullet-proof Sport greeted. "You are on hand for the performance, I see."

"Yes, certainly, sir," was returned.

"Could not well remain away, you know. But, are you quite sure you have got the right man?"

"Not a doubt of it," Dick assured. "The proof is perfect, and he cannot possibly get out of it."

The mayor and Crouse, who heard this, looked at each other puzzled.

Dick engaged the mine-owner in conversation, and together they went from the room when the prisoner was brought from the lock-up.

The detective still talked with the mine-owner, in a low tone, something that appeared to others to be of importance, and this was continued until they came to the pile of stones.

The prisoner already had been placed upon them, and everybody was remarking curiously the handcuffs on his wrists.

Deadwood Dick had a package in his hand, and when he and Bentford reached the stone rostrum, so to call it, Dick requested the mine-owner to hold the package for a moment.

Bentford took it willingly.

Dick then mounted the stone-pile, now without any fear of a secret shot, apparently.

"Men of Tip Top!" he addressed the people; "we are here this morning for the purpose of clearing an innocent man of an unjust accusation, for the purpose of putting the crime of murder where it belongs, and clearing up the mystery that has been hanging over your town."

There was a cheer.

"I have called you together not only for the purpose of showing you the murderer of Amos Dean, but, at the same time, of presenting the proofs of his deed before you, so that there can be no doubt in your minds. I have drawn the net so tightly around this man that there is no possibility of his getting out, and innocent Jack Wildmoor will be saved."

The crowd understood that he referred to Gorilla Gibb, of course.

"Now, Mr. Bentford, that package, if you please," and Dick reached out his hand to receive it.

The mine-owner, slightly pale, stepped forward and extended the package, and it was then that something happened which caused the crowd to stare in blank amaze.

The Bullet-proof Sport seized the mine-owner by the wrist, gave a jerk and landed him squarely upon the rocks beside him, and, in the same moment, as it seemed, had handcuffs on his wrists!

Bentford looked like death, and beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead.

"Wh—what does this mean?" he managed to say.

"It means that you are the man who killed Amos Dean, and who would allow an innocent man to suffer for the crime," cried Dick, in a loud voice, "miserable wretch that you are!"

"It is false! It is a lie!"

"Men of Tip Top, it is the truth!" asserted Dick. "Permit me, first of all, to make myself known to you. I am Richard M. Bristol, the detective, better known as Deadwood Dick, Junior."

He continued, but no man heard his voice, for there was a wild cheer, such as Tip Top had never heard before, perhaps, and Dick had to cease till it was done.

"I have made no mistake, gentlemen," he said, then. "The story is not a long one. I never say a man is guilty until I am prepared to prove him so, and I am ready in this instance. Is Miss Bentford here? If not, let her be sent for at once, for I want her."

"No, no, that won't do!" objected the mayor. "She could never stand et, an' et wouldn't be right."

The mayor was as nervous as an old hen.

"I am here," spoke up a clear voice, and Clarice pushed her way to the front.

She was as white as death, almost, but there was a firmness about her face that told of determination.

At sight of her, Bentford sunk down upon the nearest of the big bowlders and covered his face with his manacled hands. The

crowd wanted scarcely further proof than this.

They were pale to a man.

"This man is not the father of this young lady who has been known as his daughter," went on Dick. "He was her guardian, which fact she did not learn until quite recently. She has a fortune coming to her when of age, and he wanted to marry her himself! For this reason he killed Dean, and placed the crime upon Wildmoor, whom she loves, thus to remove both at once."

"The young lady, believing firmly in the innocence of her lover, urged her supposed father to send for me, and finally Bentford did so, but, by the same mail, he sent me a note warning me not to come here. The paper used for this he took from the young lady's bureau, and he tried to imitate the feminine hand in the writing, in which he succeeded fairly well. I came here, as you know, and he tried to put me out of the way, as he had threatened."

"When the last shot was fired, last night, Clarice saw him the moment after he had fired. She had been just too late to warn me or to disturb his aim. This morning he was prepared to try it again, and I did not venture from the hotel until I had received a signal from this lady that he had given up the purpose. On her part, she had suspected him, but did not dare to breathe such a suspicion until she found that my own suspicion was taking its course in the same direction, when she revealed all she knew."

"In this package are further papers and proofs, which I will now proceed to exhibit, after which I will restore them to their rightful owner, this young lady."

This was done, and half an hour was thus occupied.

Meantime the prisoner had sat with his face covered, and when there was a mad rush upon him, on the part of the crowd, it was found that he was dead!

Dick further exposed the doings of Crouse, Cormack, and the others, with the confession of Gorilla Gibb to back up the proofs he offered, and those confederates were promptly driven out of town, with the threat of death if they returned.

Gibb was allowed to go free, and gladly slunk back to Boot Leg, along with the rest of the denizens from that place. Dan King was rewarded for the aid he had rendered Dick, and well paid. Miller Broadaxe and George Goss, when they recovered from their amaze, put their heads together and gave Deadwood Dick a rousing reception.

Jack Wildmoor was of course soon released from custody, and eventually married Clarice Corning—that being her true name. Relations of Bentford's came in for all his property, but Clarice was put in possession of her inheritance, on coming of age, and it was no meager sum.

Deadwood Dick will never be forgotten by them. In fact, he will long be remembered by those who knew him there as Gold Guns, the Bullet-proof Sport.

He returned the bullet-proof costume to his friend, and of late the same thing, or something similar, has been exhibited in army circles by an Englishman claiming to be the discoverer.

The invention is certainly a great one, and the reader of this romance will live to learn more about it, no doubt.

THE END.

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